

CMT Community Circle Minutes

November 12, 2008

In Attendance: Ali, Meena, Chris, Darlene, Ingrid, Margaret

The question?

“A Self Help or a Service Approach”

What is self-help?

Traditional self help models refer to giving help. Whereas newer definitions refer to the act of giving help and the benefit that the giver receives from doing so. (Refer to the article below)

Self help succeeds if you develop partnerships between individuals and the community and government.

There are powerful models of self-help such as Alcoholics Anonymous which help people deal with addictions and develop new social networks and behaviour which lasts over time.

One of the basic principles of Buddhism is that you cannot help others without first developing self-knowledge. How can we help if we are expecting something in return? Through self-education we understand that we must first give to ourselves and then benefit from helping others.

CMT ACTION: Introduce more education about the self-help approach into the CMT volunteer training.

Practical self-help ideas

- Many are overwhelmed by their situation and need help sorting out the positive and negative issues. If the person becomes involved in a broader perspective in their lives, there is a better chance that we can define concrete steps that lead to some success so the person is more involved in their own future. The real skill is in helping people define their choices so they can take the right action.
- We are trying to develop literacy so that the person understands the “different systems” (work, education, health and community) and their place in it. Self-help means to educate about peoples rights in these systems and their responsibility to be independent and proactive.
- Listen first, hold your own voice and judgment. We walk with them, don't do things for them. i.e. show people how to write letters, make phone calls, practice what they would say always with the perspective that we would learn from each other.
- Don't close the door if things aren't working now, reinforce the fact that they can always come back and try again. It is important to keep a long term perspective. Some

return after three to five years saying they now have the energy to deal with the issues they were facing.

Ten Self Help Principles

(Perspectives Vol.3 no.2 Frank Reissman,
http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=358)

The self-help movement is moving into a new stage, from people providing and receiving help to these same people contributing to the formulation of systemic policy. After participating in self-help activities for more than 40 years, this is my "take" on how self-help works and the principles that drive it. These concepts can be applied to current social policy issues like welfare, volunteering, increasing productivity, fighting crime, and reforming education. I would hesitate proposing almost any new social reform without considering how these concepts might in whole or in part inform any new approach.

The explanation of key self-help principles presented here is followed by a preliminary outline of how the principles might be applied to some contemporary problems. But, first a statement of the basic conceptualization that drives the whole movement.

The Self-Help Paradigm

Self-help has revolutionized the concept of help. A traditional definition of help states that "it is an action that has a consequence of providing some benefit to or improving the well-being of another person." The problem with this formulation is that it omits a vast area of help-getting that is the result of giving help. In fact, paradoxically, it appears to be much easier for someone to give help than to receive it, and giving help aids the helper more than the recipient.

I first observed this phenomenon in selfhelp mutual aid groups, where an essential part of the self-help ethos called for members not only to receive help, but also to give it. This ethos is one important way in which mutual aid groups are unique; it distinguishes them from groups where an individual may receive help and then leave. The essence of the self-help group is giving help and benefitting from giving.

In self-help, people with problems are potential help-givers, more interdependent than dependent. It changes the helper=helppee ratio in various ways.

1. The number of individuals involved exclusively in helppee roles is vastly reduced, and the number of helpers is increased dramatically.
2. Even when receiving help, the receiver knows that tomorrow or even later in the same meeting he or she will provide help to someone else, thus removing the loss of status experienced by one who is always a receiver of help.
3. The help-giving power of the entire unit is expanded because of the power that emanates from so many individuals playing the helping role.

Resources for help increase not only quantitatively but qualitatively as well. The new helping behavior in the system derives from the experience of the help seekers, the people with the

problem, whose latent potential previously has been passive. In addition, the entire process of giving and receiving help is democratized and shared. A new ethos is born. Self-help produces a tremendous power shift, allowing any individual with a problem or illness to be a potential help, giver to others with the same condition. Instead of viewing society as having 10 million alcoholics in need of help, we also have 10 million potential help givers.

This understanding of self-help is a vision but also a tool providing a methodology for seeing problems in a nonpathological way. It releases energy that change agents can then harness for social change.

Ten Principles

I. The Peer Principle-Social Homogeneity.

Members of a self-help group possess social homogeneity; they share a similar condition whether it is raising grandchildren or being in debt, on welfare, an ex-offender, diabetic, gay or disabled. Members of the group understand each other as no one else can. The therapeutic effect and understanding of being helped by, and helping, someone else with the same problem is one of the key strengths of self-help.

Among young people, the operative peer principle is that they are influenced far more by each other than they are by parents, teachers, or other authority figures. They talk the same language and they listen to each other far more than to adults. They model themselves on other young people their own age.

The peer principle has important applicability for movement building and for identity politics. It played a major role in the development of the women's movement, gay movement, Black power movement, and disability rights movement. This principle also appears in therapeutic communities where the therapeutic agents, the group workers, are recovering from the same condition as the members of the group.

II. Self-Determination and New Forms of Participation.

Self-determination means that the activity is determined internally by the selfhelp "unit"-the individual, group, or community. This allows a new dimension of participatory democracy to emerge that is less concerned with issues of control or governance, and more with what the individual or group has to contribute. For example, if I consciously participate in an exercise and diet self-help group to improve my heart condition with like individuals, self-determination is immediate. In a subtle fashion, this represents an extension of democracy to direct participation involved in the work of helping.

III. Helper Therapy and the Restructuring of Help.

Paradoxical as it may seem, giving help is the best way of being helped. While the helper-therapy principle was initially formulated in relation to self-help groups, it has applicability to all types of helping in a wide range of settings-schools, centers for independent living, community service, and so on. In education, peer tutoring, peer counseling, and peer education are illustrative of the helper therapy principle. The principle dictates that we design situations where the receiver of help also has the opportunity to become a helper. For example, students in elementary schools are natural helpees for high school student tutors. Playing the helper role is

beneficial to the tutors; not only do they feel good about helping others, but tutoring improves their own schoolwork. They learn through teaching. For this to take place, schools consciously need to encourage help giving.

Becoming a helper after being helped reduces dependency and leads to longer lasting groups because participants do not necessarily leave when they have achieved the benefits of the group. For example, widows may remarry but remain active in the group because of what they gain from helping others. It gives the helper a sense of control: "I can't be helpless if I can help someone else."

IV. The Consumer as Producer and Consumer Capital.

Consumers of help who produce help are prosumers. Thus, in any mutual aid group, a member may be giving help at one point and receiving it at another. In self-care, for example, when diabetics inject their own insulin, they give help and receive help simultaneously.

Consumer capital is the increase in productivity that results from the input of the consumer. Individuals may pump their own gas or help themselves at a self-service market, often saving time because they do not have to wait to be served, while freeing up the employees for more specialized work that the consumer cannot do.

V. Strength vs. Pathology

The self-help approach is built on the inner strengths of the individual, group, or community. This is in contrast to a pathology orientation. Within the school community, what is needed are approaches based upon the strengths of the students such as youth-tutoring-youth programs, where underachieving students tutor younger school children who are also doing poorly. Here the message is clear that the tutors have something to give of themselves; their strengths are used as they assume the helper role.

The capacity of local citizens to resolve many problems in their community is presented in a comprehensive monograph by John Kretzmann and John McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. They suggest that "communities cannot be rebuilt by focusing on their needs, problems, and deficiencies. Rather, community building starts with the process of locating the assets, skills, and capacities of residents, citizens associations and local institutions." These assets can then be put to work on individual and community-wide problems.

Self-help groups along with other community associations such as school councils, block clubs, churches, and bowling leagues form the basic community-building tools of local neighborhoods. To find and mobilize community assets, Kretzmann and McKnight offer a five-step approach: 1) mapping assets through a capacity inventory to identify what local citizens can contribute to community building; 2) building relationships among the community's assets; 3) mobilizing the community assets for developing the local economy and exchanging information; 4) convening the community to develop a shared vision and a plan; and 5) leveraging outside resources after the first four steps have been accomplished.

VI. Non-commodification.

The help provided by self-help is contextualized by the fact that it is not a commodity to be sold and bought. Services are free and reciprocal. Unlike commercial self-help books and tapes that are sold in the marketplace for profit, mutual aid is not a commodity.

VII. Social Support.

This is a concept that is much broader than self-help. The selfhelp group is one of many forms of social support that enables individuals to withstand crisis, loss of loved one, or alienation. Supportive relationships provide a buffer against stress. They allow the individual to interpret the situation in a different and much less stressful way.

VIII. Ethos.

Ethos is not just the behavior and practices of a group, but the values that animate it. As reflected in the 12 steps, it is clear that AA reflects an ethos that is concerned with more than abstinence alone. Below are three examples:

Step 8: Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to all of them.

Step 9: Made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry out this message to alcoholics and practice these principles in all our affairs.

The self-help ethos includes both traditional and modern elements. This ethos generally is characterized by anti-dependency, anti-elitism, anti-bureaucracy, sharing community, informality, anti-addiction, a spiritual bias and an important extension of participatory democracy, particularly in the work of giving help.

IX. The Self-Help Solution.

Self-help makes human services more manageable. That's why I refer to the self-help solution. The foundation of all self-help is the unique way help is given and received. At the heart of all selfhelp practice is the notion that:

- help is given by people with the same problem or condition;
- help is not given by experts;
- help is based on indigenous experience;
- the act of seeking help is not stigmatized.

The power of self-help rests on a strong belief in experiential learning, the help-promoting properties of the group (its wisdom), and the mental health benefits derived from a cooperative mutual relationship.

X. Internality.

Self-help programs share an internal focus rather than relying on external interventions by "experts" -- teachers, therapists, clergy, or the state. The emphasis is on what's inside the individual or community.* This internal factor stands out in a number of other self-help concepts: self-determination, inner strengths, indigenous character, regenerative healing (healing from within), and resilience.

Thus, the self-help of individuals who quit smoking on their own can be contrasted with antismoking programs of the American Cancer Society; the self-help mutual aid of alcoholics in AA can be contrasted with traditional approaches that emphasize willpower and view alcoholism as a moral issue, which is very different from the philosophy developed by alcoholics themselves; and the self-help orientation of African Americans concerned with using and developing the resources of their community can be contrasted with the external interventions proposed by the government or experts outside the community.

Another dimension of internality is the selfhelp conceptualization of healing in which the important distinction is made between healing and curing. Healing is used to refer to what is done by the patient (or the patient's body) in order to resolve a problem of the body, mind, or spirit; whereas curing usually refers to what is done to the patient by a physician or therapist.

Implications of a Self-Help Strategy

Applying these concepts can strengthen various types of service interventions. Volunteering, for example, can be enhanced by -using the helper-therapy principle. The promise of a "helper's high" is useful in recruitment and training.

- Self-help can add an expanded dimension to other kinds of helping such as mentoring, therapeutic communities, peer groups, community service.
- It offers a different approach to building social capital and assisting agencies in holding clients, by converting them into prosumers and imbuing the agency with a self-help ethos.
- It helps us understand the nature and dynamics of some of the major movements of our time: women's, gay, disabled, breast cancer research, and identity politics.
- It provides a powerful new approach to productivity in the human service field. By viewing the consumer as producer, in individualized self-care as well as in selfhelp groups, society's help-giving resources are multiplied. Peer programs in schools have resulted in improvement in student learning and conduct, thus increasing the productivity of the schools. Self-help allows both the helper and helpee to gain-the helper-therapy principle.
- A sense of community may be enhanced by the ethos that derives from the fact that the help is essentially free, shared, and unstigmatized. There is a certain communal excitement attached to self-help activities. AA meetings are sometimes described as a community of strangers, bonded by a commitment. Many aspects of the self-help ethos emphasize community-sharing, responsibility and the barn-raising image. The essence of self-help mutual aid is cooperative group activity.

Applications of Self-Help Concepts

- Crime rates can be decreased by using community policing and neighborhood anticrime groups.

- Peer groups in schools can be used to convert negative peer pressure to positive peer pressure.
- Welfare dependency can be reduced by support groups that embody the self-help ethos of sharing, group interaction, and self-determination.
- The Million Man March and identity politics can be understood in light of the self-help concepts.
- Mentoring can be strengthened when the concepts of identity and the helper-therapy principle are employed.

Conclusion

There remains the question: Why call all of this self-help? Many of the principles have been applied in different contexts without being called self-help mutual aid. Moreover, there is a certain tendency in the society to downgrade self-help. We may see this as elitist, but nevertheless it is real. Can't one benefit from using these concepts without naming them anything? Yes, I believe the configuration is significant, and the individual principles gain power from their patterned usage.

While I'm aware of the backlash against self-help and the tendency not to use the term, but rather to substitute the term "support group," I see some positive surplus meaning that has movement-building potential. There are profound spiritual undertones in the selfhelp philosophy and worldview, with a great deal of hope. Colin Greer (personal communication, April 18, 1997) notes four key dimensions of the implications of self-help.

- Self-help represents among the best defenses against the individuality of a commodity culture.
- Association around self-help and across conditions produces a degree of race and class mixing that is unusual in our society.
- The activism of people in self-help organizations offers the resurgence of democratic life among ordinary people in our society, which is crucial if we're to protect and reclaim popular democracy.
- The people organized in self-help groups have an investment in effective service and can represent a major vehicle for working out and demanding the appropriate role of government in the adequate funding and delivery of services.

Taken together, Greer's points and the selfhelp principles articulated here present an important advance in the practice and theory of democracy.

** All examples of self-help, whether individual, group, community or nation, have one thing in common: promotion of latent inner strengths. Self-help emphasizes self-reliance, self-production, and self-empowerment. Although we tend to think of the word "self" as being synonymous with individual, in this redefinition the word becomes, instead, a synonym for internal.*

Frank Riessman, founding editor of [Social Policy](#), is director of the National Self-Help Clearinghouse and author of three books on self-help. This article originally appeared in the Spring, 1997 issue of [Social Policy](#) and is reprinted here with permission.

Reference

Riessman, F. (1998). Ten self-help principles. [Online]. Perspectives. [1998, March 27].