Co-regulation · About 4 minutes

Ask for the Kind of Help You Want

Giving a large need a form another person can answer

“Stay in the kitchen a minute?” The laundry still needs folding. What she wants is to tell somebody how the training went.

A request that specific can feel strangely vulnerable. It says something about what you actually want, rather than asking for advice and hoping the advice will come with company.

Amina and Ben are fictional friends. She comes home discouraged after struggling to follow a software demonstration. Ben recommends other courses. She listens politely, then goes quiet. What she wanted that evening was to fold the laundry with somebody nearby and talk about how hard the session had been. More instruction might help tomorrow.

The mismatch does not tell us that Ben is uncaring or Amina is impossible to please. They are working toward different kinds of help.

Give the wish a practical form

The wish underneath a request may be large: I want to matter to you. No single evening can fully contain that longing. Yet a small, answerable request can give it a place in ordinary life.

Amina could begin tentatively: “I think I want company more than suggestions.” She might discover as they talk that the laundry itself feels overwhelming. Then the request can change. You do not have to know exactly what you need before saying anything.

Zaki and Williams describe interpersonal emotion regulation in terms that include both seeking help with our feelings and influencing another person’s feelings.[1] That makes room to ask whose aim is guiding an exchange. Ben may be trying to remove the software problem. Amina may be trying to share the experience of having struggled.

Research by Maisel and Gable also draws attention to responsiveness: the usefulness of received support depends partly on whether it meets the recipient.[2] More suggestions are unlikely to help if suggestions are the very thing Amina is trying to set aside.

Leave room for the answer

Ben may have time to stay. He may be on his way somewhere, or able to help with a task but not talk at length. A clear request gives him a fairer chance to answer honestly. It cannot create time he does not have.

Amina can appreciate a smaller offer without pretending it meets the whole need. She can call somebody else or leave the laundry for later. If support is unavailable, the need may remain painful. That shortfall need not become evidence that she asked badly.

For reflection, compare “Tell me what I should do” with “Could you keep me company while I tell you about today?” Which one would help Ben understand this particular evening? Neither sentence is universally better. The first could be exactly right when Amina wants advice.

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Even wanted help may not make her cheerful. Ben can listen without requiring improvement as proof that his presence mattered. Amina can discover she wants quiet without turning the earlier request into a mistake.

The Co-Regulation companion considers how to help while leaving the other person their say. Here, the person who wants help gets to say what sort of company would reach them.

If they stay, the clothes get folded and somebody has heard about her day. The help she asked for was companionship.

Companion reading · You Can Help Me Without Taking Charge of Me

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Co-regulation (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Zaki, J., & Williams, W. C. (2013). Interpersonal emotion regulation. Emotion, 13(5), 803–810. Source.

[2] Maisel, N. C., & Gable, S. L. (2009). The paradox of received social support: The importance of responsiveness. Psychological Science, 20(8), 928–932. Source.

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