

Helping Others to Feel Special and Appreciated: Overcoming a “Praise Deficit”

Part II

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In my last column I noted that I had read an article in which the author wrote that many people have a "praise deficit." These words prompted me to think about an experience I had when I was a psychology trainee, an experience that exemplified someone practicing the opposite of a praise deficit. I had been quite anxious preparing for a presentation at Grand Rounds since I was not accustomed to speaking to large audiences, but when I finally spoke, things seemed to go well. Afterwards, my supervisor left a note in my mailbox that I had not expected. It read, "You did a great job today, Bob." That note set a positive tone for my entire year as a trainee and was a great boost to my confidence. It also demonstrated that my supervisor cared about me.

The concept of praise deficit is tied to my belief that one of our purposes in life should be to help others feel special and appreciated. Given this belief I began to ask my audiences of parents, educators, mental health professionals, and business people to consider such questions as: "Do you lead your personal and professional life in a manner that contributes to others feeling special and appreciated? Because you are on this earth, who in the last couple of weeks feels more special and appreciated? What is one thing you said or did with your husband, wife, child, colleague, business associate that you know because you said or did it helped the other person to feel more special and appreciated?" I have found that these questions prompt much reflection.

In my last column, I offered examples from the worlds of business and education to capture how these environments can change in a very positive way when we concentrate on lessening praise deficits. In this column I will examine the importance of overcoming praise deficits within our families in ways that communicate to our spouse, children, or other relatives that they are special in our eyes. To do so, I would like to tell you a story about my parents and "the file," a story that I hope serves as a catalyst for building your own family files.

Both of my parents were immigrants and perhaps had the equivalent of a sixth or seventh grade education (as you read what follows it will indicate that formal education is not necessarily linked to parenting skills). As I reflect upon my childhood, I realize how

fortunate my brothers and I were. My parents always found simple yet powerful ways of helping us to feel special to them. Although my father worked long hours in a small store that he owned, I felt his undivided attention whenever he was with me. However, it was the "files" that my parents kept that truly reinforced this feeling of specialness.

I love to share the story of the files at all of my workshops. Everything went into these files--birthday cards, report cards, artwork. It may sound a little crazy, but as I was growing up I felt special because of my file. I had no idea if anyone else in my neighborhood in Brooklyn had files similar to the ones that were in my home. I felt that my parents genuinely enjoyed building them. It was a wonderful feeling. Little did I realize as I grew up that someday the files were to assume even greater significance and actually become a metaphor for my relationship with my parents.

My mother died almost 20 years ago. After she died, my father told us, "I know that the files were very important to your mom, but they're just as important to me. So, if it's okay, I would like to keep them going in her memory." As he said these words I began to cry. I thought, "Here is this 76-year-old man who was saying to his sons that they were still important to him and he wanted to keep the files an active part of his life and our life. He has a wonderful way of showing he loves us and that we are special to him."

Ten years later on almost the exact anniversary of my mother's death, my father passed away. I would like to share with you the last words my father ever said to me. I share these words not out of sentimentality, but because I believe that if we can take even one small fraction of my father's words and apply them in our daily interactions with our family, all of us would lead happier, more satisfying family lives.

My wife and I were visiting my father in Florida. He was 86-years-old. Whenever we had said good-bye to my father in the past, he had always given me a warm hug and kiss good-bye, accompanied with some lovely words. On this occasion his words were even more powerful and poignant than usual, which was saying a great deal since his words were always memorable. I hope that all individuals experience at least once in their lives the joy of having a parent or other relative say something as beautiful to them as my father said to me. On the plane trip back to Boston I was so touched by my father's comment that I kept thinking, "I am so fortunate he is my father. I am so lucky. I am so blessed."

Little did I know that those were the last words I would ever hear from my father. A

couple of days after I returned to Boston I received a phone call from my brother who lives in Florida. He told me that our father had become ill very suddenly. I flew back to Florida. When I arrived at the airport, my brother informed me that my father was comatose, that he had been moved to a hospice and was not expected to live through the night. I went to the hospice and said my good-byes and my father peacefully died early the next morning.

What were my father's last words to me when I left Florida? He did not know that these would be the final words he would ever say to me, but what a lasting gift he gave me. He said, "Now Bob, remember, when you get back to Boston, if you have anything that you can send me for the file, please do. I always enjoy receiving things from you and hearing from you. You are so special to me. I love you dearly." To his dying days, he helped me to feel special.

As you reflect upon my father's words, ask yourself, "Who in my family have I helped to feel special and appreciated in the past week? Have I allowed a moment to go by in which I could have said something to my spouse or children or my parents that would have meant so much to them?" The designers of "Happy Anniversary" and "Happy Birthday" greeting cards must recognize the extent to which praise deficits exist in family life. When you have an opportunity, go to the greeting cards section of a store and read the words that are written inside many of the cards. I was surprised to see how many contained words of apology for not saying "I love you" or for not demonstrating more acts of kindness during the year. It's regrettable that such cards are necessary, but they reflect the situation in many families.

Similar to the theme expressed by these writers of greeting cards, during my career I have heard many people say that their family knows that they love them and it is not necessary to express these or similar words verbally or in writing. I think this is a mistake. When I hear people convey this view, I ask them to think about a time when their parents or spouse went out of their way to say something that helped them to feel special. Unfortunately, some cannot recall such an occurrence and when they tell me this there is evident sadness in their voice. For those who do remember such special moments their entire face "lights up." Regardless of how secure we feel, the reality is that we welcome the feeling that we are loved and appreciated.

While these expressions of fondness and appreciation should occur on a regular basis, sometimes they have even more power when they are unexpected, adding to the

feeling that we are truly loved. A note, a call, a surprise pair of tickets to a play or a ballgame may seem like small gestures but their impact is great. Even in our very busy lives, we must make every effort to be present at events that are important to our children-- their plays, their ballgames, their performances in the school concert, and certainly their birthdays.

In ending this column, I would like to describe one way that I have found very successful in overcoming a "praise deficit" and communicating to our family their importance in our lives. We must create family traditions and "special times" with our children and our spouse that nurture an atmosphere of love. I am not suggesting that establishing a special time each week should preclude the many spontaneous moments that will arise as we interact with our family but that a "special time" emphasizes its significance in family life.

While many families set aside times during the week when all family members are present, often during dinner or a family outing, I advocate that regular times be set aside for each child on an individual basis. When our children are young and we read to them, we can even say, "When I read to you it is such an important and special time that even if the phone rings I won't answer it." If you are a parent, ask yourselves how often have you answered the phone while playing or reading to your child. I continue to be impressed with how special our children feel when we let the answering machine do its job. As an example, I recall a six-year-old boy who I was seeing in therapy. In my counseling sessions I suggested to the parents that they incorporate special times with their son into their schedule, times that would not be interrupted. They followed through on this recommendation. A few weeks later this boy told me that he knew his parents loved him. When I asked what led him to feel this way, he excitedly and joyfully responded, "When they read to me and the phone rings, they let the answering machine answer it."

Special times are not solely for young children. Even as my sons became teenagers we continued the tradition of my taking one of them out for dinner one week and the other out the following week. One does not have to go out for dinner, but I found it was a nice activity. I might add that when each child in the family knows that she or he will have a time alone with a parent, it helps to lessen sibling rivalry.

For those of you reading the column who are married, it is important to find these same special times with your spouse. In my clinical practice I have been impressed by the

number of couples who say they are too busy or too tired to find time alone to rejuvenate their marriage or to talk about what is occurring in their lives. In many instances this failure to find time to be alone may be a smokescreen for the couple's hesitancy to discuss problematic situations. In many other cases, couples have told me that they enjoy being alone with each other, but other responsibilities keep them from doing so. Sadly, this state of affairs develops in many marriages and families--that is, spouses and parents become reactive rather than proactive. When emergencies arise they are "forced" to talk with each other and seek solutions. I believe it would be so much more productive and satisfying if they regularly discussed ways to create a family environment that minimized problems from occurring and if they regularly discovered ways to communicate how special their spouse or children is to them.

My parents taught me a very important lesson in life that I have attempted to communicate to others and practice myself, namely, it takes very little to offer words and deeds that help others to feel how much we care about them. I have learned that these words and deeds can have an impact throughout one's life. And I learned something else from the "files." When we build the files of others, our own file increases tenfold. We add meaning to our own life while providing precious gifts to others. These gifts become our legacies. It is little wonder that I have constantly reflected about the concept of "praise deficit" and encouraged others to lessen such a deficit from their daily lives. I hope that those reading this column will engage in some of the same reflection that I have and that it will lead you to take actions that nurture more satisfying relationships in your personal and professional life.

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