

In Pursuit of Dignity

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A major strategy of the strength-based approach I advocate involves children as well as adults engaging in what I have labeled “contributory” or “charitable” activities that enrich the lives of others. There is a burgeoning research base indicating that such activities add meaning and purpose to our lives, are an effective way for teaching children to become more empathic and compassionate, and serve as an integral dimension of a resilient lifestyle.

In my writings and presentations I have frequently described the roots of my interest in contributory activities and the impact these behaviors can have in a multitude of domains, including the school and workplace environment, psychotherapy, and parenting. These roots can be traced to my roles as (a) the principal of a school in the locked door unit of the child and adolescent program at McLean Hospital (a private psychiatric hospital) and (b) a therapist, especially in my collaboration with teachers in designing school interventions to reinforce motivation and resilience in my child and adolescent patients.

In my capacity as school principal, I initially experienced frustration, anger, and a high level of burnout triggered in part by the failure of misguided techniques to achieve disciplinary goals. Reflecting back on those days, I realize that my mindset was basically dominated by the assumption, “These are out-of-control students who need to know who is in charge.” Many of these students, in fact, were admitted to the unit in response to their out-of-control behaviors. However, the mistakes I made initially involved the ways in which I attempted to bring structure and discipline to the classrooms.

Relationships First

What did I do wrong? My staff and I expended far too much time and energy on imposing rules and consequences rather than on finding ways to develop positive relationships with the students. We were reactive rather than proactive. I recognize that given the histories of many of these students, they were not always receptive to trusting and working comfortably with adults and thus, in many ways it was easier for us to list rules for the students to follow rather than to consider how best to nurture relationships with provocative students.

How short-sighted I was in not emphasizing the influence of relationships in the disciplinary process. Years later when I co-authored *Raising a Self-Disciplined Child* with my colleague Sam Goldstein, we emphasized that discipline is most effective in the context of a good relationship. Certainly, a structured, organized classroom with clear-cut expectations is necessary for learning to occur, but the presence of rules does not guarantee the emergence of a positive environment that supports learning.

I will never forget the day when one of the students at McLean Hospital, reacting to being placed in the time-out room for several consecutive days because of his behavior, said to me in a defiant tone of voice, “You don’t get it, do you, Brooks?”

“Get what?” I asked.

“We’re going to outlast you!”

How right he was. As student behaviors deteriorated and staff morale declined, it became obvious that we had to make changes in our approach. We shifted our emphasis from listing rules and consequences (these would not be ignored but not afforded an exalted position) to creating positive relationships with the students in which they felt we truly cared about them. We wanted to foster a “welcoming” atmosphere, a task that was not always easy to accomplish given the past experiences of our students and the need for us to modify our own negative mindset and negative scripts. However, we discovered that once we devoted ourselves to abandoning these counterproductive scripts, we became freer to develop and implement strategies that facilitated the evolution of a more positive environment.

One such strategy, which I noted above, was to provide opportunities for our students to “help” others. As examples, we enlisted students to assist my secretary or myself, to orient newly admitted kids to our school (we developed a “buddy system,” an idea that actually originated from one of the students), to ensure that the physical environment was free of graffiti, and to develop a program to help students deal more effectively with anger. In the process, our relationship with students improved noticeably as did their behavior.

I recommended a similar strategy when meeting with teachers of kids I was seeing in therapy. I explained the notion of contributory activities and posed the following question, “If I were to interview students at your school and ask them to

describe one way in which they assist others at the school, could each student immediately identify one activity?" A majority of teachers with whom I spoke were intrigued by this question and embraced the idea of expanding contributory activities to all students, not just those demonstrating challenging behaviors.

Spoiling Children or Helping Them to Feel Dignified?

It was clear that some schools were already providing opportunities for students to help others. However, in many of these schools there was a group of students who were not invited to participate. Not surprisingly, they tended to be students whose academic performance and/or behaviors were questionable. I vividly recall one situation in which I advocated for one of my patients, Sarah, a fourth-grade girl who struggled with depression and occasional outbursts when she felt frustrated. Although her test scores were high, her completion of homework assignments was sporadic. She loved to read, and her parents reported she was delighted to read to several young neighborhood children.

At a school meeting I raised the question of permitting Sarah to read to first graders for a brief period of time once or twice a week. Her teacher became noticeably annoyed with my suggestion. She felt that what I was proposing was tantamount to "spoiling" children, and pronounced, "She doesn't deserve to be rewarded in that way, especially when she typically doesn't do her own homework. It's reinforcing her negative behavior. It should be the *good* kids in the class who are asked to do what you're recommending."

I was taken aback by this teacher's reply. First, I think all students in a school should be engaged in contributory activities, not just the so-called *good* students, however one assesses *goodness*. Second, the teacher's comment captured a position I have encountered on numerous occasions, which I believe represents putting the cart in front of the horse. In my presentations I attempt to capture this situation by asserting, "So often we communicate to students that if they act *dignified*, then we'll allow them to do *dignified* things (e.g., in this instance, read to younger children)." I should note that the dictionary definition of *dignity* includes "the quality or state of being worthy of honor" and "a sense of self-respect."

The problem is that if students already feel defeated in school and if they have little trust in us to support and encourage them, they are likely to experience our setting conditions for allowing them to help others as holding out a carrot that is not worth their effort to grab. Instead, they are likely to continue to display challenging behaviors, which will then be interpreted by adults as further evidence that these kids are oppositional or don't care. A negative cycle will be strengthened, further angering the adults and alienating the students.

In an attempt to lessen the probability of this negative cycle gaining momentum and becoming more entrenched, I began to pose the following question as school meetings: "What do you predict might happen if within reason we first invited students to be involved in *dignified* activities without setting significant preconditions?" The words "within reason" or "significant preconditions" were included to cover the possibility of previous situations that included behaviors judged to be dangerous to oneself and/or others that required close monitoring. In reality, such conditions involved a small minority of the students with whom I was working.

Given my personal experiences as well as research findings and programs developed by other clinicians and researchers, I believe the answer to the question about providing dignified activities is that in most instances it results in a more positive relationship with others and a greater sense of self-dignity accompanied by a rise in empathy, cooperation, and intrinsic motivation.

I have reported on this dynamic in many of my presentations and writings, including those posted for years on my website. Several of my first website articles in 1999 addressed the impact of contributory activities. Following the 9/11 attacks I wrote about these kinds of activities in assisting both children and adults to cope with the horror that had transpired. My May, 2005 piece captured the benefits of teaching prison inmates to train puppies to become guide dogs for the blind or explosive detection canines for law enforcement agencies.

One of the inmates involved in the prison program poignantly observed, "The class makes us work with each other as a team, helping one another to train the dogs, and we're focused on positive things. The program brings caring back. And once you get caring back, you can never let it go again."

In my more recent writings about contributory activities, I have tied such behaviors to helping both children and adults deal more effectively with stress and pressure, nurture self-dignity, and become more compassionate and resilient. These are topics that I never tire of addressing, perhaps even more so in a world in which anger, anxiety, prejudice, and divisiveness continue to be such dominant forces.

Helping Others Can Help At-Risk Individuals

What triggered my returning once again to this topic was an article authored by psychologist Dr. Elizabeth Hopper published by The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California-Berkeley. The title captured my attention: “How Helping Others Can Help At-Risk People” with the subtitle, “According to a new study, even people who have committed crimes feel good when they give to others.”

In her introductory paragraph, Hopper briefly summarized the advantages that accrue from acts of altruism. “Past research has shown that helping others has a wide variety of benefits: Being kind and helpful can make us happier; give us a sense of purpose and meaning; and even lower our blood pressure. People across cultures seem to experience greater well-being when they help others, suggesting this may be a human universal.” The words “a human universal” truly resonated with me. In several of our books about resilience, Sam Goldstein and I have asserted that there appears to be an inborn need to help others.

Hopper cited a study conducted by Katherine Hanniball, Lara Aknin, Kevin Douglas, and Jodi Viljoen published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. The researchers recruited individuals who had been involved in various crimes during the past five years, including drugs, fraud, theft, and assault. “These participants also scored higher than average on a test of antisocial personality traits, such as impulsivity, aggression, and a lack of empathy.”

The research format involved having some participants act in a kind, altruistic manner. They were then given a bonus that they could choose for a charitable cause such as purchasing a snack or pen for students in a low-income area. Other participants were asked to use their bonus on a gift for themselves. Even for the latter group, helping others during the study made them feel happier. The group that spent the money on a

charitable cause reported higher levels of positive emotions when compared with those who spent the money on themselves.

A second study, involving at-risk youth who had engaged in illegal activities, arrived at similar results. In both studies, people were given the choice of opting out of giving, that is, they could simply keep a smaller bonus for themselves, instead of donating the larger bonus to charity. Hopper noted, “Interestingly, the majority of participants did choose to donate the money—suggesting that there may be a universal tendency to behave prosocially when given a choice, as well as to feel good when you do so.”

Hopper then raised the question if individuals who display antisocial behaviors report feeling better when helping others, what prevents them from demonstrating kindness and altruism more often. One of the researchers, Lara Aknin at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, offered a couple of possible reasons, including that such individuals are not aware that enriching the lives of others will boost their own well-being since they have not had ample opportunity to engage previously in such actions. To support this possible explanation, Aknin found in an earlier study that people tended to incorrectly predict that spending money on themselves would boost their mood more than spending money on others.

A second possible explanation focused on the world in which the participants with criminal behaviors grew up and lived, a world that limited opportunities to show prosocial behaviors. Aknin reported that some of the participants communicated that their participation in the study proved “valuable to them—since it provided them with a chance to help others that they aren’t typically offered.”

Hopper’s conclusion closely aligned with my belief that if you provide opportunities for people to feel dignified, that even those who have had many struggles in life will often rise to the occasion. Hopper suggested, “These studies suggest that programs encouraging helping behavior could be a valuable part of prison rehabilitation programs. These programs could make people aware of the fact that helping others can boost happiness—and offer an environment where prisoners can reap these wide-ranging and long-lasting benefits.”

I should note that when I propose recommendations similar to those of Hopper's, I am sometimes asked, "Do you think providing opportunities to engage in contributory activities will be an effective technique for all students or patients (or as noted above, prisoners)?" My answer is that similar to any intervention, careful attention must be given to each individual's situation and that some interventions will be more beneficial than others. However, I feel comfortable in asserting that it is a strategy that should always be considered when our goals are to reinforce the well-being, compassion, and sense of dignity of any individual.

Let me return briefly to Sarah, the student I discussed earlier. The teacher she had the following year recognized the power of a positive relationship and strongly embraced the belief that each student's program should involve a contributory activity. Given Sarah's love of reading, this teacher not only arranged for her to read to first graders but also to assist in the library. Sarah "loved" her new teacher and, not surprisingly, she showed significant improvement in her behaviors and her desire to learn.

In thinking of Sarah and many others, I believe it is helpful to reflect upon an observation offered by Goethe, one that I have quoted on several occasions:

"Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them become what they were capable of being."

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