

A LINE ON LIFE

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Better to Give Than to Receive *

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Most of us have been told, "*It is better to give than to receive.*" Most of us assume that the saying emphasizes the "goodness" of giving. However, receiving can be a source of pain as well as pleasure.

Typically people prefer a fair "*give and take*" in their relationships. Thus, if someone helps you too much, you may feel indebted to that person. Such a feeling of indebtedness is clearly uncomfortable. Benefits received are acceptable, only if they can be repaid. Beyond that point, giving can promote hatred instead of gratitude.

Sometimes people give in order to exert **control** over others. For example, parents may give an allowance, so they can then threaten their disobedient child with cutting it off. Likewise, a nation may give "*foreign aid*" to other nations with the ulterior motive of influencing their policies and asking favors in return. People tend to be unhappy, when they feel that their freedom of choice is limited by others. Thus, if help is seen as an attempt to influence behavior, people will dislike it.

Finally, receiving aid signals some **inadequacy** on the part of the receiver – thus threatening self-esteem. For example, people often believe that students require help in their studies only when they aren't "*getting it*" on their own. Likewise, workers seem to need help in their jobs when they are performing inadequately, and people require therapeutic help only when their lives and relationships are not functioning properly. To some people, accepting help is an admission of failure – especially if others do not also seem to need such help.

Common sense seems to indicate that people would appreciate help most, when they need it most. However, psychological research does not support this "*obvious*" conclusion. People may reject sorely needed help for several reasons.

1. It may be viewed as very obligating. Your helper can later say, "*You won't do this for me, even though I helped you when you were at rock bottom?*"
2. It may strongly restrict the receiver's freedom of choice. Many poor people believe, "*I have no choice – I must go on welfare and put up with all the demeaning rules and regulations.*"
3. It may be particularly damaging to self-esteem, making you feel inadequate. The person may think, "*I'm accepting this help because I am really desperate.*"

Particular kinds of people find aid more threatening. Men often feel less comfortable receiving help than women. Similarly, stereotypical feminine people (men or women) are more likely to be comfortable seeking help, while stereotypical masculine people tend to be uncomfortable.

Cultural rules also affect reactions to receiving help. A 1981 psychological study noted that *"people in Western cultures are taught that independence is a virtue and that dependence is shameful."* Communal societies – where efforts and rewards are shared – seem to encourage both offering and receiving help more than do individualistic societies. In a 1981 study of a kibbutz (an Israeli collective farm), people who lived there reported that they would be more willing to seek help than did Israeli city dwellers. Their actual behavior backed this up, but only under certain social conditions. When given an intellectual task, kibbutz dwellers sought more aid, when it was presented as a group task. City dwellers sought more aid, when it was an individual task. This demonstrates that situational variables – along with culturally learned rules – can influence when (or if) people seek help.

Even a free gift can have a high price.

To sum it up, although it may be godly to give, it is often uncomfortable to receive. The degree of discomfort depends on the recipient's ability to reciprocate, the *"strings attached"* to the aid, how much aid is needed, and the recipient's background, gender, and personality. However, offering help in an *emergency* is unlikely to trigger any resentment. Usually the help offered in the normal *"give and take"* of everyday life causes the most problems.

This article is not written to make you feel bad about giving help to others, but to make you realize that giving might not lead to the appreciation you might expect. However, I do have a suggestion if you want to help someone that is not capable of repaying you. You can ask them to start a *"helping chain."* As a way of repaying you, ask the receiver to help someone else in the future.

"Some time in the future, even though it may mean that you have to go out of your way, give help to someone else who needs it. To reduce that person's obligation, tell them to do a similar good deed for another."

This can lead to several positive results. First, the receiver is less likely to have a negative feeling of being indebted. Second, like a *"chain letter,"* you may start a whole sequence of helping behaviors far beyond your original act. Lastly, sometime in the future, this sequence of helping acts may come back to benefit you, when you really need it.

* Adapted from Richard A Lippa's *Introduction to Social Psychology*, Wadsworth Publishing, 1990, page 512.