

How to Help Others (and Yourself)

by Mike Hawkins



Do you feel a responsibility to help others in your circle of influence? If you are like most people, you're probably saying "of course I do". You care about your friends, family, and colleagues. You want to help them, at least to the extent you can.

The question then becomes, in what areas do you feel you should help others? Then the question might be, are you open to helping people in ways that may be difficult and uncomfortable—either for them or you?

We all have needs and goals we could use help with. Many are on our wish list. Others are not, but should be. These others are the more difficult ones to help people with. They are unlike typical goals such as earning a promotion, improving a relationship, being better fit, or learning a new skill. These are areas we wish people would work on but don't because they lack self-awareness, don't want to put in the effort, or don't think it is necessary.

As examples, we all know people who could benefit from being more positive, more thoughtful, less annoying, or less controlling. We have friends, family, or colleagues who could be better in some way but they don't want to be or don't know they need to be.

In people's defense, self-improvement involves change and change is difficult. Changing engrained behaviors or learning a new skill is rarely easy. Yet so much is possible. People do learn and change.

When change is a part of helping people, applying proven practices ensures the best chance of success. These practices are listed below, but before reviewing the list, think of a problem or need to apply it to. It could be for someone else or for you. It could be stopping an undesirable behavior, improving health, earning more money, raising responsible children, bettering a relationship, or learning to do something totally new.

With a need or problem in mind, consider how well you do at helping others or yourself:

1. **Prepare.** Expand your knowledge. Explore and research the topic. Evaluate what others have done. And not done. Learn from others' successes and mistakes. Assess the perspectives of trustworthy subject-matter experts. Ask for feedback. Seek wise counsel but don't simply seek validation for what you want. Seek a challenge. Identify alternatives and possibilities worthy of the effort.
2. **Know the definition of success.** Evaluate your options and determine the results you want to achieve. Know the skill or ability to develop. Know the specific problem to solve, opportunity to leverage, need to address, or goal to pursue. Believe in it. Have passion for it. People can be overweight due to an unhealthy diet, but unless they truly believe eating a healthier diet will help them lose weight, they won't succeed in their diet.
3. **Accept responsibility.** There are always outside influences that impact our circumstances. These are often negative, but blaming them can extinguish any chances for needed change. Intercept any tendency to project, blame-shift, justify, or defend that which you control or have influence over. This includes being openminded. Focus on yourself and what you can do before expecting others to change or do something.
4. **Know what to do.** With a clear definition of success in place, create a plan to get there. Know specifically what needs to be done to achieve success. Know what new habits are needed. Identify clear responsibilities for yourself and any others who are involved. Know whatever practice regimen might be needed. Be clear about what to start doing as well as stop doing.
5. **Make it bigger than you.** Motivation to achieve something can be amplified by seeing the positive impact on others. Consider who else will benefit. Home projects are more meaningful when the entire family benefits. Effort at work has more significance when it contributes to the team's success. Avoiding undesirable temptations is easier when there are benefits to others of staying the course.

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6. **Make progress.** Get started and stay with it long enough to see some impact. Look for signs of progress so you know the time, money, effort, and resource being invested is worth it. If the goal is repairing a relationship, progress might include having renewed feelings of connectedness. If related to a workplace sales goal, progress might be seeing an uptick in inbound inquiries.
7. **Track progress.** Have someone track progress. This could be measurable metrics or more general progress reports. Or a recurring follow-up. In the context of parenting, it might be checking in on a child doing homework. Or monitoring how many miles a teenager is driving the car. At work, it might be tracking leading indicators of performance such as sales calls being made or site visits being done.
8. **Be accountable.** Receive reinforcing feedback as progress is made as well as correcting feedback when progress isn't made. Make effort and incremental results visible to others. In the workplace, this includes being aware of other's perceptions, especially those of peers and upper management. This includes receiving praise as well as correction from a boss, mentor, or respected friend.
9. **Maintain mental and physical health.** Be self-aware of and manage any stress that might be part of the journey. Maintain a healthy work-life balance. Allocate sufficient time to be with family or do whatever is enjoyable. Get sufficient sleep, exercise, and good nutrition. Do whatever is needed to maintain the energy required to stay the course and keep a can-do attitude.
10. **Reinforce motivation.** Seeing real progress is the best motivator, but motivation can still wane. Motivation is like water in a leaky bucket. If the water isn't replenished occasionally, the bucket goes empty. This might be as simple as staying informed and receiving positive feedback. It might be receiving assistance and support. Or where possible, receiving incremental validation from a subject matter expert.
11. **Overcome obstacles.** Rarely are goals achieved without having to overcome temptations, challenging circumstances, or a desire to give up. If achieving goals were easy, they wouldn't be goals. They would already be achievements. So, most goals require sustained effort, self-control, and skill. Anticipate challenges and strive to avoid them, but, when necessary, be prepared to confront them head on.
12. **Persist.** When goals take time, like earning a diploma, learning a foreign language, or writing a book, sustaining good habits are the key to success. You can see progress and be motivated, but still give up if you don't maintain self-discipline. Take it one day at a time knowing that you will eventually cross the finish line. Set your alarm, set aside time on your calendar, or stop work early, if possible, to provide the time needed.
13. **Grow, develop, and improve.** Achieving success usually involves learning and improving. Make sure it does. Make learning as important as achieving the desired result. Having a new swimming pool in your backyard, for example, is more beneficial if you also learn how to use a backhoe rather than digging it with a shovel. Look for opportunities to improve your skill, knowledge, attitude, and behaviors along the way.

Best of luck in helping others be the best they can be ... and yourself as well.

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