

Nobody Survives Alone

The Gift of Interdependence

By Lisa Lieberman, LCSW



“How can I ask anyone for help? What could I possibly give in return?” In my work both as a psychotherapist and national speaker, I hear this sentiment expressed too often by parents of children with ASD. Many adhere to the unfortunate belief that in reaching out to others for support, one must be able to give an “equal” amount in return. Perhaps they have never fully understood the gift bestowed on others just by making a request for assistance. Asking for help builds a very personal, two-way bridge that involves receiving, as well as giving others the opportunity to meaningfully participate in your life. We all need each other in one way or another to survive.

The majority of spiritual traditions place great emphasis on the importance of giving. What is generally missing from this lesson in humanity is active recognition that being able to give to others requires that there be people who are able to receive. We are not taught how to receive gracefully and, in fact, are made to feel somehow selfish, or “less than” as a receiver. Learning to ask for help, therefore, also includes gaining comfort with being on the receiving end. Eighteenth century German writer, Goethe, tells us, “Human life runs its course in the

metamorphosis between receiving and giving.” (source unknown)

So why is it so hard to ask? Our culture promotes the importance of achieving independence to an extreme, while at the same time, attaching a negative stigma to someone who displays “dependence.” In reality, there is no such thing as being human and being totally independent. Humans are meant to live in community, supporting each other for survival.

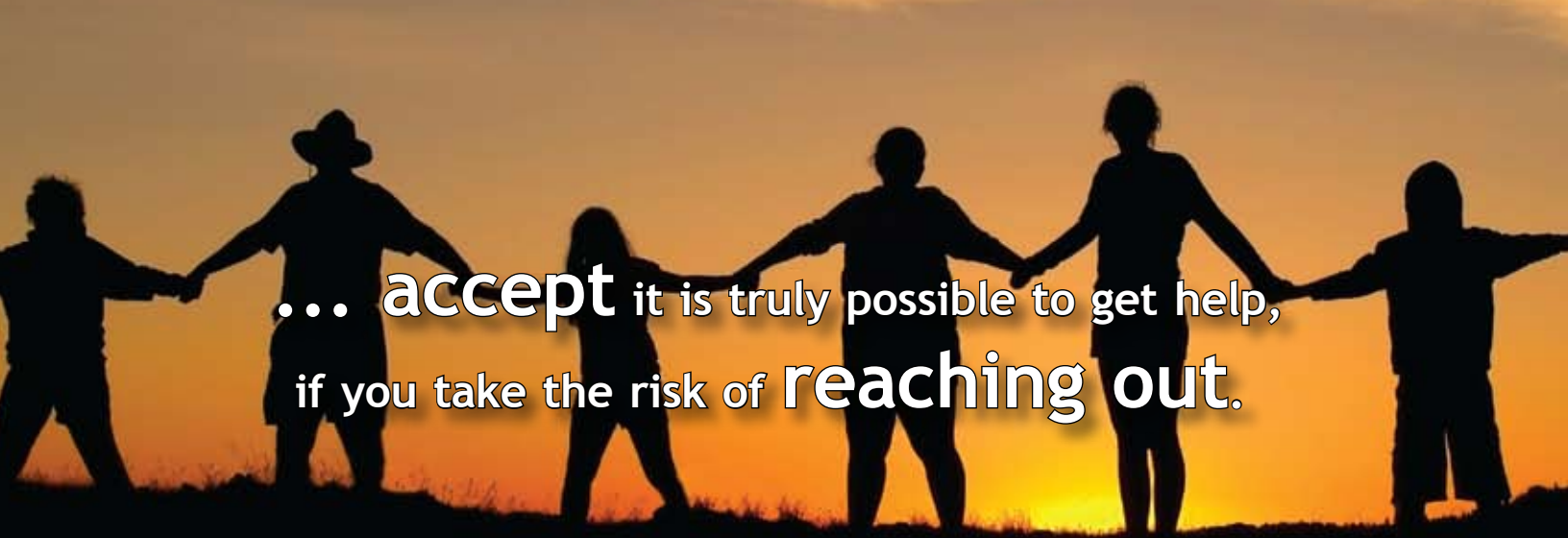
Karyn Kedar, in *God Whispers: Stories of the Soul, Lessons of the Heart* (1999) talks about community in the following way:

“Community comes from the word *common*. The word assumes an awareness that we share in the most basic way: tears, loss, love, illness, joy, fear, birth, death, life. We are not meant to live alone. We are not supposed to ignore or deny what we have in common as human beings. That is the power of community...It is the knowledge that I will never be alone when I am sick...that when I pray for the secret desires of my soul, I will be joined by others doing the same...” (pp. 105)

Kedar suggests that our desire for community is not the same as our search for friendship. Rather, we are seeking shared responsibility. What makes us a community is that sense of shared responsibility. We humans desire, as Kedar tells us, to belong to a larger community, a community that requires that we break down walls of isolation, a community that will respond to us—and that will ask us to respond in kind.

Do you hear the emphasis on mutuality, of give and take, in that process? A more meaningful notion for our lives is to strive for a sense of community with an effort towards *interdependence*. With true interdependence, everyone benefits!

Barbara is married with three young children, ages 4 to 7. Her oldest has autism and the middle child, who is adopted, has challenging behavior related to early deprivation. Although Barbara had a dream career, her own struggles with degenerative arthritis and fibromyalgia make it impossible for her to work outside the home. Some days she can do no more than sit in a chair with a hot pad and watch her children play. The decision she faces each day is “do I get in there and play with my kids, and pay for it later



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with severe pain, or do I sit back and feel guilty over being an “uninvolved” mom.” She does have extended family but feels she already relies on them too much for assistance.

Thinking she has no right to ask others for help stems from Barbara’s belief that she has nothing to offer in return. Even if that were true, it is unfortunate she doesn’t recognize the two-way bridge of mutuality. Even more regrettable is that she doesn’t recognize many valuable things she *does* have to offer. Her children have a mom who is tuned into their emotional well-being. She is available with hugs and books to read and songs to sing. She is a willing ear for friends and family who call her to talk about their struggles. She is an active member of her church. She has learned to crochet beautiful baby blankets for others. The list goes on.

Barbara cannot change her children’s diagnoses, nor can she do much to eliminate how her chronic pain interferes with daily activities. What she does have control over is her perspective about what truly matters in life, and that there is value in what she is able to give others. And Barbara must develop comfort in reaching out for help.

Parents within the autism community struggle in numerous ways. Many wives and husbands end up divorcing, leaving a single parent raising a child with ASD. Finances are often stretched thin, eaten up by therapies and programs. Not all, like Barbara, have chronic health issues, but all, nonetheless, need help from others in some way.

The responsibility still rests with parents, however, to educate people in their community about ways to be helpful. More often than not, friends and family want to help; they just don’t always know how. Expect that you will need to provide some “training” and become comfortable telling people what you need. Sol Gordon, in his book, *Is There Anything I Can Do?* (1994) writes,

“Let me say to all of you brave - and often lonely - families out there that if a friend asks you, ‘Is there anything I can do?’ always, and I mean *always*, say yes. Give your friend a small task to do. Sometimes we lose friends during a crisis because they are confused and uncertain about what is expected of them. Give old friends a chance to prove their reliability, and allow friends-in-the-making an opportunity to become more firmly bonded with you.” (p.107)

Asking for help can be broken down into four essential steps. First, and probably the most difficult task for the majority of people, is to believe they have a right to ask. “But there are so many other people in the world who have it so much worse than me!” It is not about comparing our burdens; rather we must recognize that everyone needs support during difficult times.

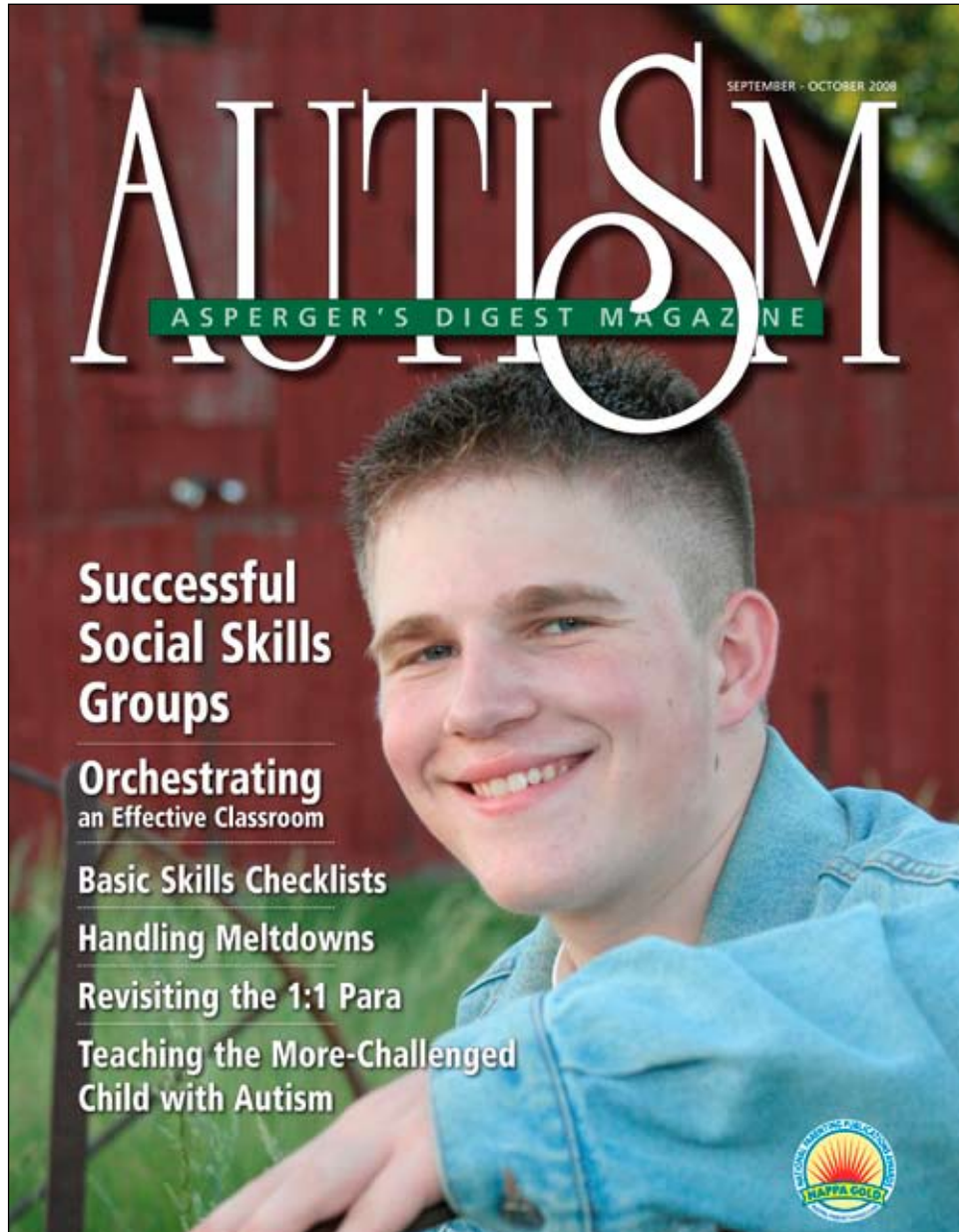
Once we get over that hurdle of acknowledging the right to ask, the next barrier is to accept it is truly

possible to get help, if you take the risk of reaching out. This can include something as simple as using positive affirmations, e.g., “there is help available to me if I ask!” Others find it helpful to imagine a scene in their mind: going through the motions of asking someone for assistance that results in a successful outcome.

The third step is simply to make a specific list of what would be helpful to you: running errands, small chores, reorganizing a closet – try not to qualify it as “worthy” or not of asking. If it helps you out, that’s reason enough. When someone says, “Let me know if there is anything I can do,” you’re ready with a specific request. Some people may be surprised by your quick response but in the end, you will soon discover whose offer is made with sincerity.

Finally, take the risk to reach out, even in a small way. By doing so, you invite people into the circle of your family and provide those who care about you a chance to participate in the dynamic balance between giving and receiving, the gift that is interdependence. ■

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