

# DO YOU WANT TO HELP ME?--

## THE ART OF RELATING

A Handbook for Volunteers, Relatives  
and Professionals

by

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*Birth and death are  
the full circle of life.*

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## PREFACE

The core of this booklet was first developed in 1973, for a workshop on one-to-one relationships for volunteers. It is appropriate for volunteers and professionals who want to increase their ability to relate at meaningful, helpful levels. The emphasis is on one-to-one relationships. An earlier, shorter version has been used in many settings for training volunteers.

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I have written from the point of view of the person being helped (the helpee?), because I have been in that position. I have been severely disabled with chronic pain, had numerous operations, faced a learning disability, had a kidney transplant, and faced a terminal condition. My strong feelings about helping relationships come more from these experiences than from my professional training.

I believe that volunteers and professionals would be more useful if they would remember how it feels to be helped, and if they would allow themselves to be helped more often.

-Stephen Henderson  
Staunton, Virginia  
December 24, 1977

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## WHO SAYS YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO?

### AN INTRODUCTION

You may be saying to yourself, "It's very fine for Henderson to tell me how to relate; he's had several years of graduate school to find things out. I'm not really capable of doing anything."

The purpose of this handbook is to give you the confidence to go ahead and do some of the things that come naturally.

You may think you must be comfortable in order to help me. If you must be comfortable, you'll never get started. Allow yourself discomfort and time to get over it. Discomfort is a good motivator. Express your discomfort to me, the person you're trying to help. I'm the one who can probably help you most with it.

What is required for effective relating is warmth, intelligence, sensitivity, and feeling; and these are certainly not learned in school. That is not to say that relating comes naturally. You have to work at it. You can learn to relate better. Most of this learning takes place inside yourself, and this handbook will help you get started on that search. Also talk to others, role play, practice, go to workshops, etc.

## AS YOU LOVE YOURSELF

You can only love me as much as you love yourself. I need a friend, and I need support. But in the long run, I'm not really looking for you. I'm looking for me. To help me find my self, you have to like your self. I've noticed that the people who push me around and give me lots of advice don't really think much of themselves. They need to feel more important.

Get in touch with yourself. Then you can let me be me.

You need to like yourself -- but you also need to be honest enough with yourself to admit your hangups about me. Perhaps you don't like my long hair, or the way I dress, or the way I talk. You don't have to like everything about me, because I want to be different. If you can be honest about what turns you off, you can walk around those things, and they won't bother us so much. If you can be honest about your hangups, some of them may even disappear.

Liking yourself doesn't mean you can't change. Don't turn me off by saying, "That's just the way I am and I can't change that." Usually you're not talking about anything very deep, but about one of your petty prejudices or hangups. I really believe people can change if they just give themselves a chance.



## WHEN YOU'RE HELPING ME

## I'M IN CONTROL

Many helpers feel that the success or failure of a relationship depends on their skills. Whether you can be helpful, however, may depend more on my ability to receive than on your ability to give. I'm in control. You need to allow me that control, because I know best what I need and how you can help me. Because I am a worthy person, you need to allow me basic control over my life. My values, not yours, will determine how I view my problem. You also need to allow me control because that's just the way things are. I do have control. You can only help me as much as I allow you to, so the sooner you accept that the less frustrated you will be.

It is, of course, very frustrating when you want to help and I can't receive. But there is also a certain freedom in knowing that you do not have to bear all the responsibility for the success of our relationship.

Before you can help me, you need to be instrumental in creating an atmosphere in which I will be more willing to receive. Other parts of this booklet will help with this.

## OPENING DOORS

So if I'm in control, how do you get things started? If you wait for me, you may wait forever. If I start talking, you can listen. But what happens before that?

Some people demand to help, whether I want it or not. When I'm in the hospital, I try to think up something for these people to do, so they will leave. I may have the first one move a flower pot from the window to the bureau, and ask the next person to move it back.

I am more likely to accept help gracefully from someone who doesn't have to help. If you can just be with me without helping, I will know you really care -- you really want to be with me.

So, at first, visit me or let me visit you. Do something that we both enjoy doing. Don't give me gifts or try to help me. That will be more meaningful later, after we're more comfortable with each other.

## LISTEN

If I have a problem, I'm the only one who can solve it -- the only one who knows all the feelings and background involved. You can help me get in touch with those feelings, and help me put them in proper perspective. I don't know of any way for you to do this except to listen. You're not a magician. You can't simply imagine how I'm feeling; you must help me tell you.

Listening doesn't mean just sitting there, doing nothing. I may think you're going to sleep. Let me know you're interested. Show your interest in your face and body; lean toward me so I'll know you're really listening. You might keep the door open by saying, "Tell me more," "I'd like to know more about that," or "How did that make you feel?"

Sometimes if you put into your own words how you think I'm feeling, you can help me see clearly what's going on. It also gives you a chance to see if you're on the right track. You might be totally wrong, but I won't care, as long as you're trying. For example, I might be in the hospital, and tell you, "I really hate this place." Well, if you're really listening to what I'm feeling, you might say something like, "You're discouraged because you've been in here so long and are feeling so bored?" And I might say, "No, I'm not really bored. I'm feeling rotten about myself. I feel worthless."



You see, you will have helped me get in touch with some feelings. So try to help me get in touch with what I'm feeling, not just with my words. After all, if I could neatly verbalize all my feelings, I probably wouldn't need you in the first place.

## QUESTIONS

Questions are especially tricky to listen to, because you don't know whether or not I want an answer. I often ask questions I know the answer to -- or at least, I know you don't know the answer, either. "Will I get the job?" "Will Phyllis go to the dance with me?" I really don't expect you to have a better answer than I do. I just need you to hear my fears and concerns.

Answering questions can close the door on further discussion. For example, if I ask, "Do you think I can make it through high school?" And you say, "Yes, I think you can." That may well be the end of that discussion.

On the other hand, if you respond, "You're wondering whether you can make it or not?" I may continue, "Yeah, I don't really think I'm smart enough," or "I have to work to help support my family." My question is just an opener. I need to go deeper.

When I ask your opinion, I usually would rather you listen to mine. You need to let me know that my opinions are important. In general, I prefer you to

interpret my question as a door-opener.  
If I really want an answer, I'll ask again.

## GIVING INFORMATION

Some people make me feel stupid every time they give me information or teach me something. It has something to do with tone of delivery and overall attitude. If I get the feeling that you know it all and I know nothing, I will probably stop listening.

I'm sure, though, that you have skills, experience, and knowledge that would be valuable to me. Whether I can accept that kind of consulting will depend on how sensitively you give it to me. You need to ask yourself; (1) "Does this person want what I have to offer?" (2) "Does he already know it?" (3) "Will the giving make this person feel smaller?"

People often give me information I don't want. They try to teach me a craft when I would rather read. They teach me how to diet, when I have no desire to lose weight. They give me information about what to do after high school, when all I'm really concerned with is who would want to go to the Homecoming Dance with me.

Before you share your knowledge with me, ask yourself, "Does he already know?" When you tell me something I obviously already know, I feel like an idiot -- you probably will, too! And watch out for cliches like, "If you spent more time

studying, you'd get better grades," or "You just have to try harder," or "If you're honest, people will trust you." Listen before talking.

## HUMOR

Just because I have a problem, I don't always have to be grim -- and neither do you. Even in the worst of situations, there are funny ironies and ambiguities. If we can share this humor, it will help keep things in perspective. Humor can also be a healthy tension reducer.

It really bugs me, however, when you crack a joke every time I get too serious or too deep for you. I know you're feeling uneasy. But please try to stick in there. Take my problem seriously, even if it seems silly (or scary) to you. Don't back off with jokes.

## A TOUCHING SCENE

Remember when you were a kid and you went into the principal's office and he was sitting on the other side of that big oak desk? Now, if you're like me, you didn't feel very close to him. You didn't feel like sharing feelings, except maybe anger. It's pretty hard to feel warm toward a principal with a desk attached to him. If you want to listen to me, we need a friendly, warm-looking place. We need to be close enough so that you can touch me. That doesn't mean that I'll necessarily

want to be touched, but you need to be close enough so that you could. I need to be able to see your eyes and your face, because they speak more than your words.

I don't want a lot of distractions -- people running through the room, telephones ringing. Listening times are special times for you and me alone. Now, sometimes I'll want to go to the fair, or the park, or to a movie, but those really aren't times for listening. Those are times for just being friends, and that's important, too. I can choose what I need, if you give me a chance.

#### MY SIDE

Sometimes the thing that will help me most is to have someone really stick up for me -- to be on my side.

Don't try to see every side of each problem; see my side. Let someone else see the other person's side. Believe in me. Go to bat for me, if appropriate. Don't always be passive in your help.

I must caution you, however. Some helpers are too quick to act. Much of the time, I just want to let off steam; to express myself without any evaluation. If you always act on what I say, I can't be free in expressing myself. Before you act on my behavior, then, check it out with me, or I won't be able to trust our relationship. I will have lost control.



## CLOSING DOORS

### CUPCAKES AND PRAYERS

I would like to share my image of many helpers.

Picture a huge, six-foot cupcake coming through the door. I know you're behind there somewhere, but I can't see you; I don't know who you are or what you're feeling. All I can see is the cupcake. We talk about the cupcake. "Ain't the pink icing nice?" "My goodness, the lacy little ribbon has 'Steve' embroidered on it -- what a thoughtful personal touch." The cupcake effectively protects you and prevents meaningful interaction. It is not a gift; it's a shield.

Some of the most common "cupcakes" are roles. Playing the role of teacher, psychologist, or even patient rather than relating as a full person often separates you from me. Nurses often use thermometers as cupcakes; for social workers, it's clipboards and questionnaires. Some ministers use prayers to avoid relating.

Now don't get the idea that I don't like cupcakes. I'm usually grateful, and they can boost my spirits. If you must bring a gift, use it as a door-opener, not a shield. Let our relationship go deeper. Being fully with me doesn't have anything to do with offerings.



If our relationship depends on gifts,  
or is just a matter of you giving and me  
receiving, then it's not full enough to be  
worthwhile.



"I'm double-parked. Just  
wanted to cheer you up, but  
I really gotta run."

"I KNOW JUST HOW YOU FEEL."  
LIKE HELL, YOU DO!

I want you to have enough experiences so that you'll be able to understand some of the things I'm talking about. But don't tell me you know how I feel. My feelings are private, and you can't have them. Besides that, it's patronizing -- it's a put-down. If you make a big point that "I've been through that myself," then you're telling me, "Well, I could handle it, so why can't you?" Or I might think you're saying, "Well, it's really not so bad. Why are you so worried?" If I say it's a problem to me, it's a real problem. It doesn't matter what your experiences are.

We are different. We didn't grow up the same; we didn't have the same parents. So you haven't been through what I have. You don't feel what I feel. You can try to get in touch with my feelings, but they'll still be mine, not yours.

Even worse is saying, "You'll grow out of it," or "You're just going through a phase," or "You'll feel better about it later." When I'm really feeling crappy about something, that's not much help. And as far as I'm concerned, it ends all conversations. It's sort of like saying, "It'll be over some day, so why talk about it now?" So I usually don't.

## SUFFERING BY COMPARISON

"I complained because I had no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet."

I think I would still want shoes. When I have a problem, I'm really not too interested in who is worse off than me. When you pull that stuff on me, I feel like you're saying, "Your problem isn't so bad; why are you so worried?"

When I'm a teenager, don't tell me, "Everybody has to go through an awkward transition." When I'm dying, don't tell me, "After all, we're all terminal." An abstract generalization has no relevance to the concrete reality of being here now.

I need to approach my problems my way -- and handle them my way.

## I'M ONLY ONE PERSON

Look, if you're going to be working just with me, you can't afford the luxury of identifying me with a group.

Don't assume that because I'm a high school student, I'm going to be interested in what to do after I graduate, or that I even want to graduate.

Don't assume that because I'm a paraplegic, all I'm concerned about is whether I'll walk again.

Don't assume that because I have long hair and run around with a loose crowd, I have a drug problem, or that I would consider it a problem if I did take drugs.

Don't assume that because I'm dying, I won't be joyful or have a sense of humor.

Don't stereotype me by your own prejudices and statistics. Deal with me and nobody else.

## BEING REAL

## ROLES

Relate to me fully. Don't stick to your role as nurse, big brother, older person, or volunteer. Sometimes I may be a helper. Sometimes we'll just pass time -- do nothing much.

Don't be afraid to be personal and fragile and fallible and real.

## SO YOU'RE NOT A GOD

You're not a God. Who cares? You're allowed to make mistakes, you know. It's hard for me to like someone who's perfect. Don't be afraid of messing me up or screwing up our relationship. I'm not that fragile. If you really care for me, we can work things out. Give yourself the freedom to make mistakes, or else you'll be too scared to help me.

Don't be afraid to tell me you're discouraged or that you don't feel very helpful. When you feel like that, I may be the only person who can help you. I want your help because you care, not because you're always right or comfortable.

If I don't turn out right, it's not your fault. You are not responsible for me. You can help me, but you can't control or own me. Even God allows me free will to make mistakes.



To really help me, you must divest yourself of power. You don't have the power to either make or break me. You can support me, but, ultimately, I am responsible for change.

#### ANGER

I've noticed that when I'm in really bad shape, no one will get mad at me. "How can you get mad at the poor boy? He's so sick; he has so many problems."

Disagreements and anger are part of any full relationship. I'm not so fragile that I can't take a little (or dish out a little, for that matter).

If I'm always late for appointments, you have a right to confront me. When I'm obnoxious, you don't have to like it. If you can occasionally express anger, I will be able to express my anger more freely, too.

When you get mad at me, don't tell me I'm no good. Tell me how you feel. For example, if you say, "I'm upset and lonely when I wait half an hour for you to come to my house," that's easier for me to respond to than, "You're irresponsible because you're always so late!" The hardest to take is when you say nothing at all, and just smolder about it all day. That really gets in the way of our relating to each other.

## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

If you're really going to be with me, you must take care of yourself. You must know your limits and be willing to touch your own feelings. I don't expect you to do this endlessly or effectively. Let me know when you've had too much, but also let me know that you'll be back. If you can express your limits to me, I won't be afraid you'll desert me. I know you'll take care of yourself well enough that you can continue to be around.

Don't let me push you around and take advantage of you. It's pretty easy to do. After all, I have a problem, and I'll probably take advantage of it. I find it easier to receive from you if I know you're taking care of your own needs, and I'm not dominating your life. If you don't take care of yourself, you only burden me with guilt.

## A FULL RELATIONSHIP

## WHAT DO I HAVE TO OFFER?

Remember, a real relationship doesn't always go one way. You're there primarily to help me, but I may have something to offer, too. After all, you're probably helping me because it makes you feel good. Well, what makes you think I don't need to feel the same way? Maybe I'd like to help you with some things around the house. You can learn from me what my life is like. It doesn't take much imagination to help me, but it takes a lot of imagination to receive from me. This receiving may be the greatest gift you have to give.

## SHARING JOY

To me, a good friend is someone with whom I can share good feelings and the good things about myself without being embarrassed. Some people seem to find it easier to deal with me when I'm having troubles. Suppose you had a terrific job, but couldn't share it with your husband or wife. It would create a void in your relationship and a certain emptiness in your joy.

Good times, good feelings, acceptance of self -- all need to be shared in a full relationship. Sometimes you can solve my problems by helping me share my strengths.

## DON'T DROP OUT ON ME

Lots of people may have dropped out on me -- my teachers, my family, my doctor. Don't you do it. That doesn't mean that you can't ever leave. I understand that you have other commitments and other things to do. But at least be my friend. If you can't help me, try to find somebody else who can. Sit down and explain to me why you can't be with me any more. Don't just desert me. If you're not willing to stick with me when I'm obnoxious, don't start in the first place.

## TELL ME THAT YOU LOVE ME

You know, you won't make it easy for me to express feelings if you're not willing to express your own. If I'm your friend and you like me, tell me. You may have to tell me many times, because I may not believe you.

Sometimes gifts get in the way of a relationship. In fact, I've found that many of the people in my life give me things because they aren't able to love me. Do give me time, a touch, caring, and advocacy. I want you to feel something for me, and I want to know about it. You may think your feelings are obvious, but I'm no magician. Tell me that you love me!

## THE AUTHOR

Stephen Henderson has been teaching and counseling since 1966. He has an M.S. in Counseling Psychology from Iowa State University. Steve has done personal, education, and occupational counseling of all kinds. Both Steve and Morgan Henderson are experienced leaders in group work, volunteer training, death and dying and chronic illness. They have led over 400 workshops in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. Steve is also an accomplished tenor soloist.

Steve writes from his personal experience. In 1966 he had one of the early, experimental kidney transplants. After seizures and kidney failure, in 1987 he had a second successful transplant and is feeling terrific. He now has kidneys from both his father and brother, Bill.

## FULL CIRCLE COUNSELING, INC.

Full Circle Counseling, Inc., is dedicated to the counseling and training of persons as they face change and crises in their lives, including death. This nonprofit, nonsectarian corporation is formed to support the work of Stephen and Morgan Henderson as they share their experiences with life and death and their counseling and training expertise. Full Circle works in cooperation with volunteers and professionals, service and church groups, hospices, hospitals, and individuals to bring programs to your community.