

# THE FOUNDATIONS OF RESPECT

The quality of our lives are deeply influenced by the quality of our relationships, be they professional, familial, romantic or platonic. When we don't learn how to build healthy and wholesome relationships through effective communication, our lives and mental health break down. Communication skills enable us to build and maintain relationships, understand and express feelings and help solve problems. According to a 2013 study, 45% of young people referred to mental health services have underlying communication difficulties, which are most often left unidentified and untreated [1]. With so many people struggling with the skills necessary to build relationships and ask for support, give and receive love and set up boundaries, there's little wonder as to why we're currently in a mental health epidemic.

Though even those with good communication skills can suffer in their relationships because they have not learned about the art of respect. Respect is a foundational element in any healthy and meaningful relationship; it cannot be demanded, bought or expected: it must always be earned. Earning respect relies less on skill and tactic and more on attitude. The attitude we take towards people is what impacts our beliefs, and ultimately our behaviours towards others.

## NO ONE HAS BAD INTENTIONS (JUST BEHAVIOURS)

Behind every behaviour is a positive intention. No one goes out of their way to consciously sabotage themselves; everyone always strives to do their best with the resources they have available to them.

Whilst we may never fully comprehend the motives of others, it's important to assume the positive intentions underlying and influencing their behaviour. Whilst the positive intention of a behaviour, particularly a bad one, is very rarely obvious, and usually incredibly difficult to decipher, it's crucial to remember it's there. No smoker smokes to purposely damage their health: they smoke because the habit gives them some positive feelings about themselves. Rather than assuming the worst in people based on their behaviour, be gentle and understanding, and apply the same empathy to yourself.

## PEOPLE ARE NOT THEIR BEHAVIOURS

There are many people whom we recognise as having done something bad in life, but most of the time, they are punished under the assumption that they are incapable of changing, a belief and attitude so limiting that it not only dangerous but ineffective and unhelpful.

Helpers must subscribe to the idea that all people have the capacity to change provided that they are willing and ready to. Whilst Helpers can reject a person's attitudes, crimes, or habits, they should always accept people unconditionally and never dismiss them. Helpers should seek to understand people and better appreciate how their habits and self-defeating behaviours are not cast in stone but are instead choices that can be modified at any given moment in time.



# THE FOUNDATIONS OF RESPECT

## WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

People aren't as good as they think they are at identifying the gaps in their knowledge; ignorance plagues everyone in society, even experts of fields are ignorant about something they're trained or educated in. But learning is stronger than knowledge, perception is more potent than reality, and vision is more significant than actuality. We will never be perfectly knowledgeable, but we can always be teachable. It's important that we all understand information from the perspective of wanting to share it with other people, rather than for personal gain, and that we always stay curious and ask questions.

Once we accept that we don't know what we don't know, that we only have our own life experiences to refer to, we can start to become more aware of how judgemental we can be when meeting others. Appreciate and embrace the limits of your knowledge, be open to learning from others, and evaluating knowledge fairly and analytically. Limits are not to be ashamed of: they're something we all have, and we can only grow and develop the scope of our limitations by remaining teachable and open to others perspective and experiences of life.

## BE UNTO OTHERS...

Being unto others as you would want them to be unto you is the essence of being a skilled helper. We all fundamentally know and understand what it means to be kind, helpful and generous, honest, integral and loving based on our own imaginings of what such a person would be like to have in our lives. It's easier to grasp and develop a vision of the kind of people we want in our lives than it is to develop and envision the people we want to become. By adopting an attitude in which we vow to be the change we want to see in the world, and by prioritising giving over getting, we can attract the kind of energy, outcomes and people we want more of in our lives without relying on, and waiting for, the world to change for us.

## THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist who was one of the two founders of semiotics, was the first man to create a division between words and the objects they represented. Saussure's linguistic theory taught us that the signifier (the word) was not the same entity as the signified (the concept.) He argued that when the signifier and signified came together they formed a "sign", and that it was signs people responded to, as the entire process was psychological. [2]

In the same way, people respond to signs rather than things, people respond to their experiences rather than reality itself. Two people can see the same event but both have two completely different responses to it. This is because we don't have access to reality as it is, we do not know reality. We experience reality through our senses, our filter systems, our beliefs — our own personal 'map' of reality which has an agenda written into it. Helpers work by modifying the 'maps' that are not currently working for a client into something far more useful; you can add more data in, try laying on different meanings or enrich your internal library by drawing up new comparisons.



# THE FOUNDATIONS OF RESPECT

## SEEK UNDERSTANDING BEFORE ALL OTHER THINGS

Sometimes we all fall into the trap of thinking that our perceptions reflect reality; believing that the way we see the world is actually how it is. We may meet someone who is quiet and presume they are rude or shy, or be on the receiving end of a harsh remark and assume that person is unkind or doesn't like us. It's very easy to judge people based on our "reality" of how they behave or act, but no one's actions, behaviours or beliefs are so surface level: they have been formulated out of a complex web of experiences developed and accumulated over a lifetime.

Everyone has a reason, or reasons, for being the way that they are; their ways of being in the world are responsive coping mechanisms that they learned during their early development stages in life which either positively or negatively serve them in adulthood. For example, you may regard a people-pleasing person as someone who is "fake" or believe they "suck up" to others in order to further an agenda, when in reality they come from an emotionally abusive upbringing where they were made to never feel good enough, and only survived (or avoided) verbal and emotional abuse from their parents if they bent to their every whim and went out of their way to prove themselves a good and worthy child.

Helpers should never judge other people based on how they are at face value: we should always seek the 'why' underpinning the way people are in life. Helpers should be investigators of people and learn to unfold and understand the complexity of their existence, the uniqueness of their circumstance and the organic and sincere motives behind how they've become the person they are today.

## HOW WE ARE RECEIVED = RESPONSES WE GET

We can analyse the way we are in the world around certain people by analysing the responses we elicit from them. When we are received positively by another, we can be certain that the other person is assigning a positive meaning to how we are communicating (i.e. what we are saying and how we are saying it), or visa-versa if they respond negatively to us). This concept requires us to become more aware of how we are presenting ourselves to other people. The more aware we become of ourselves, the more we become aware of how others are responding to us.

### **References and Resources**

Cohen N.J., Farnia F., Im-Bolter N. (2013) 'Higher order language competence and adolescent mental health'. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*. Jul 54 (7):733-44. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23451725>  
2. Saussure, F. (1959). *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: Philosophical Library.

