

May 26, 2010 Open Mic Recap Self-care: Who Cares for the Care-giver?

Highlights: *"If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." That wisdom occurs to me when I think about the splendid hour we spent on May 26 talking about self-care. We discussed the importance of taking care of ourselves, and talked about our own tried-and-true self-caring practices. The conversation then took off in unanticipated directions: about the dividing line between "helping" and "enabling", about what good boundaries, and about the ABC's (and D's and E's) of clear thinking. As for my carefully-developed plan for how this OM hour "should" go: well, let's just say that if you get quiet and listen very carefully, you might hear the distant sound of cosmic laughter. Read on...*

Recap: Following our customary one-minute centering moment (a good self-care practice in itself), I asked what about the topic of Self-care had attracted participants to call in. Callers expressed interest in (a) learning more about "how to do it", (b) validating their own approaches to taking care of themselves, and (c) getting some good self-care by having a conversation about it. As one said, "It feels like I can go weeks without someone asking how I am."

Sidebar: I often ask an audience of financial planners "How many of you have had clients ask you, in the midst of these financial storms, 'How are you doing?' and really want to know?" Ever hand goes up -- which speaks well of your client relationships.

I asked OM participants to share one or more practices they have used successfully to keep them on an even keel (or to restore their equilibrium), since September 2008 (you know, Lehman Brothers, AIG, and all that). Here's a synopsis of what they said:

"Going for walks."

"Crocheting."

"Knitting." (sounds like a trend here or, if you allow me, a thread)

"Practicing meditation in the morning"

"Training for triathlons" (i.e., the discipline and the physical effects of high-level exercise)

"Adopting a new attitude: life is short, try not to stress myself over small things."

"Practicing good boundaries." (I asked "Do you mean in your personal life, in your work life, elsewhere? Her answer: "Yes.")

"I was getting upset over something, couldn't shake it, and a colleague told me to 'Just get over it.' I know it's easier to say than to do, but I took it as a challenge, and I worked at it. I stopped focusing on the incident, stopped telling myself the same story over and over, and after a while, I could barely remember what it was that had gotten me so upset." (This is a great example of the benefits of interrupting a negative cycle and "de-focusing." It's often difficult to let go of our habitual and quite delicious storylines,

because we have so much invested in our tales. More often than not, however, they are empty calories - or worse, they contain toxins.)

I offered this definition of Self-care: *“Practices and habits that keep you stable, functional (performing well), feeling reasonably good (“well-being”), and growing and developing.”*

I explained that this concept of self-care is intentionally comprehensive as well as demanding, because I believe we should strive to do more than **cope** (although that’s certainly necessary), **perform** (also necessary) and **feel good** (important, because positive emotions and mood power up our performance and make us more resilient); it’s also necessary that we continue to **grow and develop**, because that’s how we gain greater ability to master what the world throws at us, and embrace the opportunities it presents.

The comments about boundaries and ‘just getting over it’ led a caller to ask me “Can you explain the difference between helping and enabling?” She sometimes gets into a pattern with a client in which she repeatedly (i.e., three or four times) offers assistance in the same, and begins to wonder if it’s something the client can learn to do for themselves. After some discussion, I suggested that she offer to teach the client how to perform the task (for example, budget preparation), and ask how they learn such a task best (to build on the strengths in their learning style, rather than assuming she knows how they learn best). And if that didn’t work, a next approach might be to ask the client, “What would it take for you to be able to do this yourself?” (Note: tone of voice is critically important when asking a question such as this one: it’s intended as an open-minded inquiry to learn, rather than as a hands-on-hips taunt for them to “get with the program!”)

Conversation was flowing energetically and, remembering what Open Mic is all about, I set aside my over-prepared didactic material and exercises. Basically, “Open” is about being open to the emerging needs of the group members; the “Mic” part is that everyone’s voice counts. I went with the flow, and it continued to flow.

Another participant noted that she also has encountered this pattern, and often wonders “if I am more worried for them than they are about themselves.” She related a story in which she confronted a client with whom she was feeling increasing exasperation over their not following through on certain agreed-upon actions. “I told them, ‘It feels like I care more about your financial well-being than you do,’ and the client said, *‘That’s exactly the idea - that’s why I hired you as my planner!’* I told them this pattern wouldn’t help them, and we have to change that if we’re to continue working together.” The client eventually transferred their funds management elsewhere, which was all right with the planner. “There wasn’t any learning and retention, for their growth,” she added, and she doesn’t want to encourage this kind of client relationship.

I noted that this is a wonderful opportunity for her to go beyond deciding what she doesn’t want in a client relationship, to identify her profile of her ideal client and her ideal client-planner relationship. I explained that having good boundaries is “simply” a matter of identifying, accepting, and calmly-and-forthrightly declaring (a) what you stand for - and (b) what you won’t stand for. (Note: Yes, clear boundaries are as “simple” as that but, as you know so well, what’s *simple* isn’t necessarily *easy*. However, getting clear about what’s “simple” - i.e., what you want and do not want, what is life-affirming and life-

diminishing -- is a first step in the process of going from “Well, it’s easy for you to say” to “it’s doable” if not truly “easy.”)

Another noted “Sometimes it’s my own fault for not getting my air time. I’ll sit and listen, and I have a choice about bringing up my topics or continuing to listen.” I thought that was a great point, and reminded me of one of the ground rules of the Art of Hosting (www.artofhosting.com): “Ask for what you need, and give what you can.” That’s a neat phrase, and I think that wisdom comes in learning the balance between the two poles, in a way that’s life-giving for you and others, and diminishes neither one.

Appreciatively,
Ed

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