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Did you know that well-meant support can do more harm than good?

When I want to help my 10-year-old boy with his homework, he gets visibly nervous, doesn't listen and thinks “I already know that”, even if he doesn't know it yet. I ask myself, why doesn't my son like to accept help? I find it hard to understand that he thinks of himself that he already knows everything. When I help a friend to move into another house, my friend doesn’t express the same feelings as my son. I expect, that there must be a difference in the way I help. Why is that so? Why can I help one person and he is grateful for it but another one feels put in an unpleasant situation by the offered help?

Different types of social support

In 1986, an article appeared in the Journal of Health and Social Behaviour, that was a systematic review of the literature on social support. It showed that perceived support (an understanding about what kind of resources someone thinks they have) is more important than received support (the actual receiving of help) in predicting how well stressful life events can be managed. The researchers provided also evidence, that the influence of received support may be controlled by perceived support (Wethington & Kessler, 1986). Since then, several studies have dealt with the question of when and why perceived or received social support is good for health. The answer is complex, as there are differences in the type of support, for example emotional support (e.g. to be able to show genuine concern when someone is overwhelmed) or instrumental help, such as helping to solve a task. It does not come to mean the same thing when a stranger gives support or a partner does. It also depends on the reason why someone helps, and there might also be a difference if someone perceives that he gets help or not.

Invisible or visible help

Social psychologist Niall Bolger and his colleagues found evidence that the most effective support is unnoticed by the recipient. They show also that these invisible forms of help can reduce stress (Bolger et al., 2000). One speaks of invisible support when the person receiving the help does not notice that they are being supported. An example of this could be when someone recommends an unemployed person for a job without the person concerned knowing it. In 2007, researchers conducted a second study with the intention of finding out more about the phenomenon of invisible support. Bolger and colleagues came to the conclusion that social support is particularly ineffective when it triggers feelings of shame, incompetence or failure in the recipient and thus threatens their self-worth (Bolger & Amarel, 2007). Similarly, other researchers found that social support has a negative effect if the recipient does not feel properly understood or valued (Maisel & Gable, 2009). However, other researchers showed costs of visible support but not the benefits of invisible support and there is growing recognition that people differ in how much they benefit from invisible support. A study published in 2018 showed that people's motivation plays a role in whether visible or invisible support is effective. People who are motivated to take action are more likely to benefit from visible support than invisible. Invisible help was more effective than visible help when people liked to deal with evaluations and comparisons before they acted (Zee et al., 2018). An other study pointed out that the pros and cons of visible support

are directly dependent on the nature of the persons needs and invisible support can influence whether someone achieves their long-term goal (Girme et al., 2013). Other studies demonstrate the importance of assessing different temporal effects associated with support acts and provide the first evidence that invisible support enhances relationship satisfaction and furthermore does so across days (Girme et al., 2018).

What are the outcomes of invisible help?

As we have seen so far, invisible help can have an effect on mood. But there are other outcomes. At the behavioural level, a study found that invisible support may buffer negative emotions in a health-behaviour change context for male partners of dual-smoker couples (Lüscher et al., 2019). Another study found that invisible help can also have a measurable impact on the body. That study found that how the recipient of support feels about their ability to manage their problems can lead to measurable changes in the level of the stress hormone cortisol (Crockett et al., 2017).

What did I learn from the inputs?

In sum, support-visibility research has clarified how I can give support effectively.
If I help my son in a hidden way, for example by telling him a story or watching a film with similar problems to his, he can deal with it much better. So it makes a difference if he experiences in a story how someone who has the same problems was helped or if he gets direct help. If my son asks me directly for help, then I can do that without any problems and I know that he appreciates my support. It is different when I see that he is having trouble with something and he is ashamed of it. In this case I have to think about how I can help him without him noticing. I don't want to increase his stress level by offering him direct help. Invisible help is also important because my son is not someone who jumps off and acts immediately, but first thinks about how this might be perceived by other people.
I believe that it is worth to think about what kind of help is offered in which situation. This is not only necessary in the family context, but also at work or elsewhere. In the future I will always ask myself how and when I can help, what is the motivation of the recipient of help and what about his self-confidence and self-efficacy, or sense of personal ability.

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