

About the



Self-Help - Myth or Magic?

Eyes light up and everyone sounds enthusiastic talking about self-help. The BBC Television grapevine programmes on Monday evenings inspire us to do things for ourselves. As a 'professional' I encourage self-help groups and I feel worried lest I work myself out of a job. How can 'they' possibly do it as well as 'we' can? We need you, 'our' clients, patients, students, we need you to want us, to be dependent on us! Without you we are nothing.

I talked to two teachers - what do you do, I asked, to help pupils cope with the present employment situation? How can you help them to help themselves?

The first one said, oh, but we do a lot. We talk about interviewing skills, how to write a job application, how best to present yourself. . . The second said, yes, we do have role-change exercises, we set up exercises where we each in turn become interviewee and interviewer. Do you go any further, I asked, for instance, where they can play each other's roles so that they can see how they come across to others? (This is based on my contention that interviewing failures often represent failures in relationships generally, unable to share even on a superficial level, sullen, hostile or frightened, as they may be in any other situation with people.) Well, she said, we would need to consult parents before we do anything so drastic. After all, this sort of thing may well reveal family or personal confidences, or it may cause some hurt and upset....

Change of scene. A mental health (health?) day hospital. One young man in his late twenties out of work for many years, looks and acts like an oaf but when you come to know him he is really intelligent and likeable. 'I want a bed-sitter of my own', he says, 'I have been looking for one for many months, I am registered with so many agencies but every time I go to see a place it seems to have just been let'. . . We set up a drama exercise, first act it straight, here is your landlady and you have come to ask about a room 'I want a room' he says to her in his usual gruff, heavy, off-putting manner, 'and I want you to give me a rent book'. Do you really want a room we ask him, or a rent book? He looks bewildered. Well, we say, change places, be the landlady. He is a good landlady, he knows all the answers of how to refuse. But he doesn't see what he does or how he comes across. We do this many times over, first one, then the other. Then we have someone else play himself, play each role, and he just watches himself being brutally mimicked, aped, lampooned. He cries and he suffers and we share our suffering and our pain. Yes, I know, this is what I am like, he says, but what can I do? We leave it at that, more or less. Three weeks later he has found himself a room and is very happy. Do you think what we did the other day

helped you at all, we asked him. Oh no, he said, of course not, it had **nothing to do** with it, did it...

Well, I suppose this isn't really self-help at all. I am often accused of **setting up training** sessions for group leaders of self-help groups, a contradiction in its own terms. Well, we have to start somewhere, I say, the idea is that we learn from each other, we all have something to contribute, most of us have had some experience of how to start these groups, how to organise them, how to find local resources, publicity, support. We can help each other at least this much, and then pull out as soon as possible. 'How patronising and professional can you get', they say.

I put on a weekend for careers advisers, to see if we can practice some of these techniques and learn from each other. I write to over 200 careers advisers all over the country. Only 4 reply. The weekend is called off. On the other hand a conference on 'Role Conflict and Authority' attracts some 70 bookings. A local authority evening course for voluntary social workers to help develop local community and neighbourhood groups has between 40 and 80 people attending every autumn.

Last February we started the Association for Self-Help and Community Groups, and when this was mentioned in the Guardian we had some 300 replies. So much more can be done, the limits of human resources are boundless. Human energy is boundless. Energy creates energy, I say, and I have some stories to tell to back it up. Jean and I sit in the car, she complaining that John, her husband, has so little energy. He is a schoolmaster and needs all his energy to keep his class in order, poor man, brings his work home as well, no energy left to make love to her, what can she do, she feels sorry for him. Some weeks later she says bitterly, he found himself a much younger woman and moved in with her. All of a sudden he had energy to spare.

I went to a group of young mothers and babies run by a local health visitor. Health visitors seem particularly helpful and cooperative. Two of the mothers say they have had problems with post natal depression but were much better now. If only they had known someone to talk to, to share. If I hear of any such mothers now they would be willing to befriend them and help them through it. A woman who used to be agoraphobic visits a man who locks himself in and won't go out, and she has so much patience with him, understands his problems better than I can ever do. As a result I have worked out a list of possible ways people can help each other, asking for those who need help and those who can offer it.

Community action, self-help, there are so many different kinds of people who come under this heading, from trade unions to tenant associations to play groups and children's and old people's holiday schemes, to student self-help at universities, to anti-psychiatry advice centres. Many of them deal with people, offer help and advice to people who are lonely, who have problems making friends, live alone, unable to get on, compete, stand up to the many stresses, or simply need the support to grow and develop that we all need. Those who just want to meet new friends find that in groups of this kind they are under no pressure to do anything, commit themselves to anyone,

and have a chance to get to know each other informally. I always wonder what sort of pressure drives anyone to marriage clubs and what happens when they meet? I can imagine the judgments, is he or she good enough for me, am I good enough for him or her, I am good enough? We need time to explore each other, to get to know each other. 'Last night I met my twelve best friends for the first time' said a journalist after he had been to one of these encounter groups. We explore the resources in each of us and get to know each other in new and often unexpected ways. We tend to emphasise feelings and explore relationships that may be quite unnecessary. I don't have to hide my feelings in this group once I know I have their support. Without a group leader the group will learn to do without daddy or teacher. There is likely to be some leadership competition, some power struggle, and the group will learn to deal with that, too. Usually any such group will go as far as each member can allow himself to trust himself and others. There is a constant testing process going on. With little trust little will happen. We test each other in many subtle ways, like a child finding out about the world around it. Some of the simpler trust exercises can be learned easily enough.

And so it goes. Why not ask your local education centre, college, polytechnic whether they are willing to put on evening courses in group dynamics, or just simply for a group of people to get together to get to know each other? Local community centres of which there are many all over the country may also be interested or may already have similar groups.

Hans Lobstein

THIS MONTHS EVENT

September 24th at Acacia House, Acton, a day on PREMA, a new approach to and development of peer counselling by Will Grossman. Details on separate enclosure with the August issue.

TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS ISSUE

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