

January 2024 Communication Tip

As we launch another year caring for patients, for the first Communication Tip of the New Year, I want to **invite us all to consider just what exactly we are doing at work**. Below, please find selections from a beautiful commentary by Rachel Naomi Remen, MD (Teacher, Best-selling author, and Clinical Professor Emeritus of Family and Community Medicine at the UCSF). The whole piece is widely-available online and is from her wonderful book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*.

It's called **"Helping, Fixing or Serving?"** (The highlighting below is mine.)

Helping, fixing and serving represent three different ways of seeing life. When you help, you see life as weak. When you fix, you see life as broken. When you serve, you see life as whole.

Fixing and helping may be the work of the ego, and service the work of the soul. Service rests on the premise that the nature of life is sacred, that life is a holy mystery which has an unknown purpose. When we serve, we know that we belong to life and to that purpose. From the perspective of service, we are all connected: All suffering is like my suffering and all joy is like my joy. The impulse to serve emerges naturally and inevitably from this way of seeing. Serving is different from helping. Helping is not a relationship between equals. A helper may see others as weaker than they are, needier than they are, and people often feel this inequality. The danger in helping is that we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity or even wholeness. When we help, we become aware of our own strength.

But when we serve, we don't serve with our strength; we serve with ourselves, and we draw from all of our experiences. Our limitations serve; our wounds serve; even our darkness can serve. My pain is the source of my compassion; my woundedness is the key to my empathy. Serving makes us aware of our wholeness and its power. The wholeness in us serves the wholeness in others and the wholeness in life. The wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me. Service is a relationship between equals: our service strengthens us as well as others. Fixing and helping are draining, and over time we may burn out, but service is renewing. When we serve, our work itself will renew us. In helping we may find a sense of satisfaction; in serving we find a sense of gratitude.

We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch. Fixing and helping are strategies to repair life. We serve life not because it is broken but because it is holy. Serving requires us to know that our humanity is more powerful than our expertise. In forty-five years of chronic illness I have been helped by a great number of people, and fixed by a great many others who did not recognize my wholeness. All that fixing and helping left me wounded in some important and fundamental ways. Only service heals. Service is not an experience of strength or expertise; service is an experience of mystery, surrender and awe. Helpers and fixers feel causal. Servers may experience from time to time a sense of being used by larger unknown forces. Those who serve have traded a sense of

mastery for an experience of mystery, and in doing so have transformed their work and their lives into practice.

May the New Year bring us all healing, opportunities to serve, and, urgently, Peace in our world.

If you want more Rachel Remen in 2024, please check out the House Calls podcast from our surgeon general, Vivek Murthy, MD, featuring Rachel:

<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/house-calls/rachel-naomi-remen/index.html>

All my best,
Mike

P.S. You can find an archive of all my past communication tips on the MERI website: <https://meri.ucsf.edu/meri-center-communication-tips>

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