

## ***Why It's Hard to Ask People to Help You***

### **Pre-reading exercises**

Before you read the article, look at the box below. In the box, Readers A and B wrote reflections telling how they felt about the article. Read their reflections. Then do Exercise 1 under the box.

#### **Two readers' reflections (feelings) about this article.**

**Reader A:** *After reading this, I now would like to research more about the evolutionary reasons why it is so painful for people to ask someone for help...*

**Reader B:** *I was surprised by something in this article. It said that "people underestimate by half how likely[strangers] are to help us." In my country, we rarely would ask a stranger for help. ...*

**Exercise 1 Pre-reading:** Read the reflections of Readers A and B and answer questions below.

1. What reflection type did Reader A use?
  - a) She explained what was interesting in the article.
  - b) She told what surprised her.
  - c) She told about research that she'd like to do about this topic.
2. What reflection type did Reader B use?
  - a) She explained what was interesting in the article.
  - b) She told what surprised her.
  - c) She told about research that she'd like to do about this topic.

**Exercise 3: Quick reading.** Read ONLY

- (1) the first paragraph,
- (2) the first sentence of each paragraph
- (3) the last paragraph

## Why It's Hard to Ask People to Help You

<sup>1</sup> Thinking about asking someone to help us is painful. Researchers have found that when we feel physical pain, for example, if we hurt our leg, an area of our brain becomes active. Surprisingly, that same area of the brain becomes active when we think about asking someone to help us.

<sup>2</sup> The researchers explain that when we ask for help, we worry that we are bothering that person or that we will be rejected or liked less, or that that people will think that we are weak or stupid.

<sup>3</sup> This uncomfortable feeling is especially strong at our workplace because we want to show our expertise to our boss and co-workers and to look confident. If we need help, we believe that others will consider us as being unqualified for the job.

<sup>4</sup> According to Heidi Grant, a social psychologist and author of *Reinforcements: How To Get People to Help You*, there is no evidence that people will think less of us if we ask for help. In fact, according to research, people will actually like us more if we do and like us more *after* they have helped us.

<sup>5</sup> The problem is that we fail to take the perspective of other people. When we think about asking someone for help, in our minds, we think about how busy that person might be, or how difficult or unpleasant or annoying it would be for them to help us. This makes us feel sure that they will say, "No."

<sup>6</sup> Grant says that people will actually like us more if we ask them for help. And according to brain research, our brains are designed to want to help others. Studies show that when we do something for others, the part of the brain that becomes active is the same one that is stimulated by food and sex. In other words, it's pleasurable.

<sup>7</sup> There is a Chinese saying that says, "If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody." In other words, happiness is found in helping others.

<sup>8</sup> If someone rejected our request for help in the past, we assume that they just didn't want to help us. However, that isn't necessarily true; they could have had some good reasons why they weren't able to help us at that time. Interestingly, research has found that if a person couldn't help us in the past, they are actually more likely to be willing to help us in the future. This is probably because they want to feel better themselves, and they want to repair their relationship with you.

<sup>9</sup> Besides feeling happy, there are other reasons why people tend to be willing to help others. In general, people think it's a good idea to help, so they don't like to say no to a request. They might think that saying no could negatively affect their relationship, and thus, they might feel guilty. Even with complete strangers, people underestimate by half how likely they are to help us.

### How to ask for help (sometimes)

<sup>10</sup> Grant tells about a psychologist, Vanessa Bonds, who conducted a study to see how willing strangers would be willing to help someone. In the study, there were two parts. First, her students went to a busy train station and asked commuters who were walking to or from their trains, "Would you mind taking a moment to fill out this questionnaire?" Interestingly, a little over 50% of these busy people were willing to stop and answer the questionnaire.

<sup>11</sup> In the second part of the study, when the students approached the commuters, they asked, "Excuse me. Could you do me a favor?" Then they waited for the person to answer yes or no before saying, "Would you mind taking a moment to fill out this questionnaire?" This time, the success rate was around 87-88%. The reason why this approach was so successful was because of what psychologists call "pre-commitment." In other words, if I ask you, "Could you do me a favor?" and you say, "Yes," it means that you have kind of agree to help me. After kind of agreeing, it's difficult for you later to change your mind.

<sup>12</sup> Even though this technique is powerful, Grant says it can cause problems if you use it too often

with your friends and co-workers. It can seem like you are trying to manipulate (control) them if you always start, "Can I ask you a favor?" and then wait for them to accept. In order for someone to feel good about helping others, it has to feel autonomous. They need to feel like they are helping because they want to, not because you "tricked" them into helping. If you ask, "Can you do me a favor?" first, you are forcing them to agree to help before they even know what you would like them to do, and then they will feel obligated to help.

**How not to ask for help and how to ask for it**

<sup>13</sup> Some people start by greatly apologizing, for example, "I really sorry to bother you because I know you are very busy and I feel badly asking you to help me, but I'm really terrible at using software, so I wonder if you could help me ...?" The person will start to feel bad for you and then feel obligated to help you, which will take away their pleasure in helping.

<sup>14</sup> Another technique that we should avoid is offering a payment or reward, for example, "If you could help me paint my bedroom, I'll pay you \$50." In our minds, we think that this would be a good approach because offering a reward will make others more motivated to help. However, people feel good when they can help someone because they want to, not because they will get a reward.

<sup>15</sup> A common mistake that people make is to ask a request to a big group of people with the hope that one of them will offer to help. Psychologists have found that, ironically, the more people who can help, the less likely anyone will feel like they need to. Kevin needed someone to drive him home after his eye appointment. Instead of sending one email to his eight friends, he sent an individual email to each one. Amy Grant says that this approach works better because people really do want to give help. It's rewarding because it gives them a chance to be a support and to connect with others.

<sup>16</sup> This might seem obvious, but some people find it hard to do: if you want help, you have to ask for it. You should be very direct and explain clearly that you want help and what you'd like the other person to do. For example, Nikos got an email from a co-worker, Tina, one day, and she asked him if he'd like to have coffee because she had something that she wanted to talk to him about. He was kind of surprised at her invitation since they had never talked to each other outside work, so he wondered why she wanted to meet. He felt quite uncomfortable because he had a feeling she was going to want him to do something, but he didn't know what it was nor whether he'd be able to do it or even if he would want to do it. Thus, he politely told her that he wouldn't be able to meet because of an important project that he was working on.

<sup>17</sup> Tina was planning to go on a two-week vacation and was hoping that Nikos could take care of her dogs while she was away. If Tina had been very direct and clear about this, perhaps he would have been happy to do it.

<sup>18</sup> People like to feel good about themselves, so when we asked for help, it's a good idea to mention something positive about them. For example, Clea wanted to transfer from her community college to a university and needed to write a letter to send with her application. She asked Sylvie in an email if she could help her write the letter. At the end of her email asking Sylvie for help, Clea wrote, "Thank you, Sylvie. You are always so helpful."

<sup>19</sup> Finally, it's important (and helpful if you would like more help in the future) if you let the person know what happened as a result of their help. It can be a simple, short message to them. For example, a day after Sylvie helped her, Clea could write, "I just wanted to let you know how confident I feel about my application after all the help you gave me." Or after she got accepted by the university, when she sees Sylvie, she can say, "Thanks to all your help with my letter, the university has just accepted me."

**Exercise 4:** Answer these questions after doing a quick reading.

1. Answer True (T) or False (F).

- 1) The author claims that people enjoy asking other people for help.
- 2) It's especially difficult to ask our family members to help us.
- 3) If we ask someone for help, they will like us more.
- 4) People feel good when they can help someone.
- 5) It's a good idea to tell someone that you will pay them some money if they will help you.

## Part 1

**Exercise 4:** Read ¶ 1-12 of the article.

**Exercise 5:** Answer the study guide questions below about ¶1-4.

1. When does the part of the brain that indicates physical pain become active?

- a) When we ask someone for help.
- b) When we are thinking about asking someone for help.
- c) When someone tells us that they can't help us.

2. Why do we tend to not want to ask for help?

- a) We think the other person will have a negative reaction to us.
- b) We think that the other person probably doesn't have the skills to help us.
- c) We think that the other person will want us to help them in the future.

3. Why is it a good idea to ask other people to help us?

- a) Because we can't do something ourselves, so we need help.
- b) Because other people might have the ability to help us with our problem.
- c) Because other people will have a favorable opinion of us if we do.

4. **Challenging Question.** You don't have to answer it if it's too difficult for you.

- It says in ¶ 5, "The problem is that we fail to take the perspective of other people." Explain what this means.

5. In ¶ 6-7, the author discusses helping others and happiness. In the paraphrase, you see underline words. Circle the correct ones.

Research shows that our brains / stomachs are made to enjoy / to avoid helping others. When we help others a part of our brain stops / becomes active. That part of the brain is the same one that is active when we feel pain / we are eating. According to the Chinese law / proverb, the greatest feeling of happiness / pain comes from helping others / money.

6. About ¶ 8-9, answer True (T) or False (F)

- 1) Most people would prefer to help us than to refuse to help us.
- 2) If someone can't help us when we first ask them, they probably won't help us in the future either.
- 3) If I predict that there is only a 20% chance that a stranger would help me, the truth is that there is a 40% chance that they will.
- 4) If someone refuses to help us, we imagine that it's because they don't want to.

Answer these next questions about ¶ 10-12.

7. Which of these questions starters got more people to answer the questionnaire?

- a) Would you mind taking a moment ...?
- b) Could you do me a favor?"
- c) Could you answer some questions for me?

8. The students asked, "Could you do me a favor?" After this, who did they ask, "Would you mind taking a moment to fill out this questionnaire?"

- a) All the commuters that they talked to.
- b) Only the commuters who said they weren't in a hurry.
- c) Only the commuter who said, "Yes."

9. When is it difficult to change your mind?

- a) After you have agreed to help someone.
- b) After someone has asked you to help them.
- c) After you explain what kind of help you need.

10. The author says "...has to feel autonomous." What does he mean?

- a) The people have to feel like they had a choice whether or not to help.
- b) The people have to feel like they must help you.
- c) They people have to feel like they will get a reward if they help you.

11. Write a short reflection about the information in ¶ 1-12. You can write just one or two sentences. In your reaction, your first sentence can be one of these:

- *I found some interesting/important information in this article.*
- *After reading this, I now would like to (learn more about /read more research about /...)*
- *There is some information in this article that I could apply to my life.*
- *I agree / disagree with the author about something.*
- *This article reminded me of (me/ my family/my friend).*
- *I was surprised by something in this article.*

**PART 2****Exercise 6: Read ¶ 13-19**

**Exercise 6:** Answer the study guide questions below.

12. In ¶ 13-15, the author discusses asking for help. In the paraphrase, you see underline words. Circle the correct ones.

There are ways that will interfere with / increase the pleasure people will feel by helping you.

One of these ways is if we thank them for their help / apologize for asking them to help. If we do this, the person might accept our requests because they like to help / feel sorry for us.

Similarly, people want / don't want to help us because we offer to pay them. This will take away / increase their enjoyment of helping with / without a reward.

Answer these next questions about ¶ 15-17.

13. If you ask a big group of people for help rather than just one person ...
  - a) there is a good chance some of them will probably offer.
  - b) it's less likely that anyone will offer.
  - c) many of them will feel like they should help you.
14. Why was Kevin's approach successful.
  - a) Because he contacted several people on one email.
  - b) Because they wanted to get a reward for driving him to the appointment.
  - c) Because everybody he contacted probably thought they were the only ones he wrote to.
15. The story about Nikos and Tina is an example of ...
  - a) someone who tried to take an indirect approach to asking for help.
  - b) someone who wanted to make a friendship before asking for help.
  - c) someone who clearly asked for help.
16. Why did Nikos reject Tina's invitation?
  - a) Because he didn't know that she wanted to ask him for help.
  - b) Because he really didn't want to help her.
  - c) Because he thought that she was probably trying to get him to be her boyfriend.

17. What would have happened if Tina had asked Nikos to take care of her dogs?

- a) He would have accepted her request.
- b) He might have accepted her request.
- c) He wouldn't have accepted her request.

Answer these next questions about ¶ 18-19.

18. In ¶ 18, it says, "People like to feel good about themselves..." Explain what this means.

19. Answer True (T) or False (F)

- 1) An example of saying "something positive about them" is: "You have so many great experiences."
- 2) According to the article, we should not tell people what happened after they helped us.
- 3) People like to know that after they helped us, we appreciated what they did.

**Exercise 7.** Write a reflection about the article. Try to write a paragraph with several sentences. In your reaction, your first sentence can be one of these:

- *I found some interesting/important information in this article.*
- *After reading this, I now would like to (learn more about /read more research about /...)*
- *There is some information in this article that I could apply to my life.*
- *I agree / disagree with the author about something.*
- *This article reminded me of (me/ my family/my friend).*
- *I was surprised by something in this article.*

**AK Why It's Hard to Ask People to Help You****Exercise 1 Pre-reading:**

1.  c) She told about research that she'd like to do about this topic.
2.  b) She told what surprised her.

**Exercise 4:** Answer these questions after doing a quick reading.

1. Answer True (T) or False (F).

\_\_F\_ 1) The author claims that people enjoy asking other people for help.  
\_\_F\_ 2)  
\_\_T\_ 3)  
\_\_T\_ 4)  
\_\_F\_ 5)

**Part 1****Exercise 5:**

1.  b) When we are thinking about asking someone for help.
2.  a) We think the other person will have a negative reaction to us.
3.  c) Because other people will have a favorable opinion of us if we do.
4. **Challenging Question.** You don't have to answer it if it's too difficult for you.

5.

Research shows that our brains / stomachs are made to enjoy / to avoid helping others. When we help others a part of our brain stops / becomes active. That part of the brain is the same one that is active when we feel pain / we are eating. According to the Chinese law / proverb, the greatest feeling of happiness / pain comes from helping others / money.

6. \_T\_ 1) Most people would prefer to help us than to refuse to help us.  
\_F\_ 2)  
\_T\_ 3)  
\_T\_ 4)

Answer these next questions about ¶ 10-12.

7.  b) Could you do me a favor?"
8.  c) Only the commuter who said, "Yes."
9.  a) After you have agreed to help someone.
10.  a) The people have to feel like they had a choice whether or not to help.

## PART 2

### Exercise 6:

12.

There are ways that will interfere with / increase the pleasure people will feel by helping you.

One of these ways is if we thank them for their help / apologize for asking them to help. If we do this, the person might accept our requests because they like to help / feel sorry for us.

Similarly, people want / don't want to help us because we offer to pay them. This will take away / increase their enjoyment of helping with / without a reward.

13.  b) it's less likely that anyone will offer.

14.  c) Because everybody he contacted probably thought they were the only ones he wrote to.

15.  a) someone who tried to take an indirect approach to asking for help.

16.  a) Because he didn't know that she wanted to ask him for help.

17.  b) He might have accepted her request.

18. In ¶ 18, it says, "People like to feel good about themselves..." Explain what this means.

*People want to think that they are good people.*

19.

T \_ 1) An example of saying "something positive about them" is: "You have so many great experiences."

F \_ 2)

T \_ 3)