

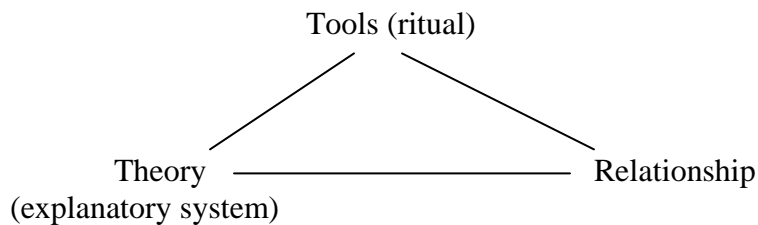
Chapter Three: The Model of Relationship

Last updated: October, 2006 – this is currently an incomplete draft version.

The writings of this author have focused on improving the quality of “help” that is provided to people. This is help that is mostly done through some form of direct contact. This is contact between friends, family members, co-workers, and contacts made between practitioners in the helping professions and those who come seeking help. This author has proposed that when we offer to help people it involves entering into a relationship with them. Some readers may disagree with this, and say that it is possible to help people without a relationship. But this argument rests on one’s definition of relationship. Almost all of us have at least a few people in our lives we care about, to whom we offer help, and who we support within some form of relationship. It has been proposed by this author that our awareness of the characteristics of relationships that directly foster the experience of well being needs to be significantly improved.

It is proposed that the relationship we form, when we offer help, is part of how we provide support to others. It is also proposed that the relationship affects the quality of the support provided. We enter with expectations about the relationship and some model about relationship, perhaps with some intent to decrease suffering, or to help the other with gradual change in the direction of meeting their needs. We offer help with some idea of how to act in the relationship so that we can be successful at helping.

Figure: Placing the model of relationship in context.



The entire series this author has written on the art and science of helping is based on ideas about the helping relationship. The author has made reference in several of his books to the distinction between the experienced phenomena of well being within the healing relationship and teaching about it using ritual and some explanatory system. This is not to say that teaching about the phenomena is not helpful, but rather to say that it is not the same and should not be confused with being the same. This in itself is a part of defining a relationship model, defining the characteristics of the helping relationship.

This author has offered to the reader a description of the helping relationship as being a process that moves in and out of different types of relationships. These different types of relationships include the following: the healing relationship, the

support relationship, the habitual relationship, and the mystic relationship. The book describing the ultimate relationship is an attempt to merge the features of the healing relationship and the mystic relationship and extrapolate them to a pinnacle of growth fostering relationships. All combined they represent a model of relationship. It is a model designed to stimulate practitioners to evaluate their relationship stance – to examine how one sits in the helping relationship. It is not offered as a perfect model, and it is likely to be reshaped in the years to come. What is important to understand, and seldom explored in depth, is that how we think about relationship affects our understanding of compassion and how we seek to help others.

Definition of Relationship Stance

It is proposed here that relationship stance is one of the most significant concepts affecting the helping relationship, and ultimately the entire helping profession. It is also something that is defined by each individual's (learner and practitioner) model of relationship. Perhaps it is common sense that when we reach out to help another we also reach out to enter into a relationship. But the support relationship is not just any relationship that we seek to enter. We are seeking to enter into our own idea of what a helping relationship means. This idea that we carry into the support relationship, or **relationship stance**, is built upon our model of relationship.

It may be that many practitioners have not taken the time to examine how they sit in the helping relationship and exactly what that relationship stance means in terms of quality care. It is proposed here that such an analysis is necessary to move the quality of care forward. Every time we seek to help another person we enter into a relationship with the dynamic process of one person needing help and the other offering it. As we enter that dynamic process we do so in a prepared relationship stance, a relationship stance that is used during the helping process, and affects that dynamic process. We stand in the helping relationship in a certain way that affects what happens as we seek to offer help.

The concept of relationship stance can be simply viewed as the relationship between two people. But relationships stance in regard to the helping professions is a much broader construct. It refers to how the practitioner stands in the relationship during the dynamic process of helping. This definition includes one's relationship stance with anything that can affect the process of change in the helping relationship. Here is where the practitioner can start to build their own model of relationship.

Table: Components of Relationship Stance

| Component | Example within this Author's Writings |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Concepts of Helping | Fundamental Core Concepts of Helping |
| Nature of Mind | Model of Mind |
| Nature of Change | Model of Change |
| Nature of Relationship | Model of Relationship |

How we define our relationship stance is directly connected to how we define four basic components: 1) the fundamental concepts underlying the process of helping, 2) what we use to explain the nature of a person's mind (body, behavior, thoughts, feelings), 3) how we define the process of change as we offer help, and 4) how we define the nature, or scope, of relationship during the process of change. Each of these components interacts with each other and sitting within that dynamic interaction during the process of helping is what defines relationship stance.

Law of Relationship Stance

A person's relationship stance will affect what happens within the helping relationship.

Perhaps the most familiar relationship stance in the helping profession is the one often called "professional". The practitioner has developed some ideas of what it means to act as a professional helper. These ideas shape how the practitioner sits within the relationship when offering help. This is often shown as professional distance, which is sometimes seen as cold and non-caring. But it is simply the practitioner's relationship stance built on a set of assumptions within their own model of relationship. It is just one example of the effects of relationship stance on the helping relationship.

Empathy Definition and the Point of View

In entering the helping relationship one's relationship stance is perhaps the most is most influenced by empathy. The following assumptions about empathy serve as a foundation for building the relationship model:

Empathy exists.

Empathy is discovered experientially and one's understanding is linked as such.

There are different types of empathy experiences ranging from basic to advanced.

The reader may disagree with any one of these assumptions. A detailed argument supporting these assumptions can be found in this author's book "The Healing Relationship" which also includes the argument that empathy is a fundamental part of facilitating well being within the helping relationship. Without repeating all the material that supports these assumptions let us consider them to be valid and then reflect upon what they mean for relationship stance and building a model of relationship.

Assuming empathy exists then it is something that, by definition, occurs between beings. People have a wide variety of definitions of empathy due to the

experiential nature of empathy. The lack of consensus on empathy definition has been a problem both in research and in communication using the term. In this chapter a model of relationship is to be built based on the concept of relationship stance which is intertwined with empathy. A definition of empathy is needed in order to build the foundation of this model.

Principle: A person's definition of empathy affects their relationship stance.

Here empathy is defined as a shared phenomenon, a moment where suffering is mutually experienced and the intent of well being is maintained. In the helping relationship it is a moment of shared suffering and sometimes catharsis along with movement into well being. But the experience of the shared suffering is unique to the term empathy. The practitioner sits in a space between self and other, then the other joins that space and freely reveals suffering. This suffering is then experienced (not just thought about) by the practitioner. At the same time the practitioner holds, within the space between, the intent of well being which can be experienced by the other person. It is a taking and a giving process that happens without doing, but rather simply by being fully present in the moment. This is the empathy definition which will be used as the foundation for the relationship model presented here.

Not everyone would agree to this definition of empathy because their definitions are strongly linked to their specific range of empathy experiences within their lives. This is important to understand because relationship stance, in the helping profession, is linked to one's understanding and practice of empathy. It also means that the empathy definition offered here will be hard for some to grasp. This then may make the relationship model presented also difficult. The reader is referred to this author's other books for more information if this model becomes too difficult.

There are several features of the proposed empathy definition which are important in shaping the construct of relationship stance as the foundation for the model of relationship. These are as follows: shared experiential suffering in the moment, mutuality, the shift into well being, and the concept of not doing.

The experience of empathy is a moment of shared experiential suffering, during the process of offering help to another. It is possible to share moments of bliss, and other sensations not related to suffering. But during most of the instances when we are asked to help it is because there is some form of suffering. This sharing of the suffering experience is not imagination, not role playing, not sympathy, and not trying to find a way to match what the other is describing to what our memories tell us. It is a shared experience in the moment as if the two were one, not separate from each other in the experience. It is almost like they are both going through it at the same time and living the moment together.

An important aspect to this shared experience is that there is a sense that both people are experiencing it together and both sense that the experience is happening, that a connection is occurring. This is the mutuality of the experience. Sometimes this mutuality is heard, sensed, by the one who is suffering at such a low level that it is almost missed. In addition many people have not experienced such mutuality and do not know what it feels like. The practitioner may need to point the person's attention to the phenomenon. The practitioner does not describe what is happening but rather asks the person to look, focus, consider, reflect and then describe. If this mutuality does not exist then the practitioner should seriously reexamine what did transpire.

The combined aspects of empathy, shared experience and mutuality, define a special type of relationship. It is a relationship which serves as the foundation for this relationship model. These two characteristics of shared experience and mutuality suggest a union between two people during the moment of helping. There is no confusion about the nature of the suffering, and no doubt that the practitioner deeply knows the person in that moment. This is a relationship which can not be known by viewing it from an "objective" outsider stance. It can only be known from the insider viewpoint. This has significant ramifications for building a relationship model.

It is possible to build a relationship model without empathy, but then that would be a model that neglects a basic part of human nature that is linked to our survival and well being. When we are connected through empathy we are connected so we understand another's needs without confusion and the other person knows that we are connected to them. This knowing that we are connected to them can be very comforting, feel safe, and there can be a sense of trust. With this sense of trust the person is able to relax and allows more of their suffering to be revealed. As more of the suffering is revealed this opens the possibility for greater movement toward well being.

This movement toward well being can not occur if the practitioner can not "hold" such intent within the space between. This is the other important aspect of empathy. The practitioner maintains this intent to help maintain inner health and minimize contamination. The intent is also maintained so that the other person can experience it with in the space between. This is another reason why mutuality is important. The three aspects of empathy are all intertwined aspects of the same event.

Holding the space between with a sacred sense of well being is not the same as having it as a goal, or being attached to it as something that must occur. The other person is free to remain in suffering and to not move toward well being. The practitioner can only sit in an empathy relationship where the other person is willing to sit. There are times when the other person, for whatever reason, will not sense any movement toward well being. Although this may be difficult at time it NEVER means that the intent is absent.

The practitioner also does not know the specific details of the path that the person should take to move toward well being. This is discovered in the moment and the practitioner holds the intent within the space between. The practitioner is simply a guide who points out what is discovered along the journey. There is no limit to the variations of what can be discovered and how. The practitioner's view is one of an observer who is living the experiences of the moment with the other person. The other person's view is that the practitioner is right there, side-by-side, not as a source of solutions but as a mirror and safety net. These are view points that can only be richly understood from inside the relationship.

These points of view affect relationship stance. If we have the insider point of view then our relationship stance is different than if we have the outsider point of view. Those who are part of the empathy moment have a different understanding of it than those who are outside and just viewing it. It also means that the view changes at various levels of empathy connection – from no connection to a deep, advanced empathy, connection. These different views of relationship affect how we enter into a relationship when helping another. These different views affect our relationship stance.

Boundaries and Relationship Stance

In establishing a professional, or even paraprofessional, helping relationship there are almost always some type of boundaries. Boundaries are designed to help prevent harm to either person in the relationship. Both people entering the support relationship do so with boundaries. In addition to boundaries about how to act there are boundaries about what they allow themselves to feel and think while in the relationship. These boundaries affect how the relationship develops, the relationships stance.

Principle: The boundaries a person has affects relationship stance.

Boundaries can be grouped into two broad categories – personal and professional. Within each of those categories boundaries can be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. They can also change depending on the environment. Boundaries are like inner walls that we hold up to keep us from experiencing something within the relationship. These are walls erected either for personal protection, or to meet our interpretation of professional ethics.

Perhaps the most obvious example of a professional boundary is that people trained in the helping profession should not have sex with those they are helping. It is something that can cause harm. This relationship boundary can be expanded to include what are termed dual relationships. When the trained practitioner has a current relationship with the person, for example an intimate one, and that person

comes seeking help the practitioner generally should not enter into a professional helping relationship with that same person. But that doesn't mean there isn't an intimate support relationship that is provided. Both can be provided, and in most instances it is best that they are provided by different people.

There are many different types of problems that can be associated with dual relationships. The practitioner needs to be aware of the ethical guidelines for the profession and their own sense of what could cause harm. In addition seek advice from peers in your same profession. The "professional stance" may be something that is an exaggeration of this need for clear boundaries. It takes some time, and practice, but it is possible to act with empathy and compassion and still maintain ethical relationship boundaries.

Role Definitions and Relationship Model

Closely related to relationship stance is our conception of role relationships and the boundaries we place around them. Relationship stance is more about our personal history with relationships and how that affects how we stand in the helping relationship. Role definitions are culturally defined expectations surrounding the behaviors that are considered to be permissible within a relationship if that relationship is to foster growth and well being. But relationship stance and role definitions are often intertwined.

Relationship with the Self

The concept of relationship stance is predicated on the premise that we learn about relationships and that this learning shapes our stance. The definition of relationship stance suggests that prior to entering the support relationship you are looking at the relationship and then preparing yourself for that entering. Some of this self preparation might be deliberate, and some a reaction, but it all comes from the self in the moment of entering the relationship.

Saying that relationship stance comes from the self is not the same as saying that the support relationship comes from the self. The support relationship is composed of many interrelated feedback loops all of which affect what happens within the support relationship moment. The self, or one's concept of self, is just one part of that dynamic process.

Principle: A person's concept of self affects relationship stance.

How you view yourself will affect relationship stance, and in turn affect the quality of the support relationship.

Relationship with the Sacred

This author has proposed that the process of helping contains a sacred element. This is briefly explored in “The Healing Relationship” and examined in more detail within “Calling God Collect”, which looks at the mystic relationship. This sense of the sacred can become a part of one’s relationship model.

Perhaps one way of looking at the importance of a sense of the sacred within a relationship model is to have a combination of reverence and humility for the act of helping others. It means that we hold the act of helping others in the highest regard and we hold ourselves within a space of genuine humbleness (knowing our human frailties). Holding the act of helping in such a relationship stance may help to improve the quality of the support relationship. Within the “professional stance”, and the mechanistic approach to helping others, we sometimes forget the sense of the sacred. We, who are given the opportunity to help someone, are also receiving. It is a place that can be healing for all if it is held within a relationship conducive to such mutuality.

Another way of looking at the sense of the sacred is to understand that many things are connected to a person’s process of gradual change. You are just one person entering into the person’s life for one moment to offer help. The person must then leave that moment and walk throughout life hopefully carrying something from that moment. Will that moment have an impact? Will it trigger some gradual change process that will ripple throughout that person’s life? Suffering has many causes, and decreasing suffering many different approaches. There are many things in a person’s life that contribute to the gradual change away from suffering and into well being. As a person offering support – we are only one piece. There is humility to be found in this.

All of the interconnections in a person’s life offer the possibility of triggering gradual change. In offering support we offer support to all those connections and their potential to trigger change. There is humility to be found here also. In addition we are not responsible for whatever change might occur. It is the person, their actions and interactions in the world after they leave our efforts to support them, that carries the full responsibility of gradual change. Most often we are not responsible for the person’s gradual change process. Humility can be found in this perspective too.

This idea of a vast array of interconnected systems that can affect gradual change within the individual is the entryway into a sense of the sacred. If we begin to stretch out that fabric of interconnections we can see that it could go on, and on,

beyond our vision. It could even extend infinitely – out to the ends of the universe and down to the smallest subatomic particles. At some level the person involved in gradual change is connected to everything. We are also connected to everything. Our awareness of the nature of this connection to everything changes depending on our relationship stance and its connections to our sense of the sacred.

Intimacy and the Support Relationship

Often people have ideas about what an intimate relationship means. These are ideas connected to sexuality, finding a mate, and sharing deeply. Sharing on deep empathy or sacred way can often be interpreted as intimate, and can be confused with the type of loving relationship you might form with your mate. Yet a healthy relationship model should contain clear distinctions between the helping relationship and the intimate one you would have with your mate.

Relationship with Community

Community includes a wide variety of interactions: family, peers, institutions, and culture. Within all these settings there are ways in which we perceive what it means to be in relationship. These perceptions affect how we provide the support relationship.

Relationship with the World

We are a part the changing interactive ecosystem around us. It is a system that is the world we live in and it supplies us with what our bodies need to survive. Do we ask ourselves how do we stand in relationship to the natural world?

Compassion and Relationship

Perhaps it seems obvious to state that our concept of relationship affects of conception and practice of compassion. But what may seem like common sense is not easily seen reflected in practice. It requires some reflective time to consider your own level of empathy understanding, your own relationship stance, and how each of those reflects on your understanding and practice of compassion – or what can be called your compassion readiness.

How ready are we to sit with suffering and to do so with a deep sense of compassion? This is our compassion readiness. It is something that is not static

across time, or situation, or society. Compassion readiness can be greatly developed in some and nearly absent in others. Compassion readiness can fluctuate within a given person and even within a single day. Yet it is compassion that leads us away from social destruction and toward an evolution of relationship connectedness. Deep compassion is developed through the practice of a more resilient compassion readiness underlain by a deeper empathy.

If we are to evolve then it will not be as isolated beings conceiving of ourselves as separate from all other life forms. Instead we will learn how to listen to the connections all around us and to develop that listening to greater depths. This is not some “new age” arm waving or some “pop psychology”. It is simply a statement of obvious fact that we all live within an interconnected web of life energy systems. It is possible to hear our relationship to those connections with greater clarity and this occurs through the development of compassion.

Connections and the Model of Relationship

Relationship is about how things relate to one another. Building a model of relationship means that we take a look at how we relate to people and things in our life. We then look at how our particular type of relating relates to other things connected to providing quality support. It is sort of like starting out in the center of a spider web and building the connections outward.

The model of relationship presented here is initially quite simple. It is composed of four parts. The first are the founding concepts of the helping relationship which offer basic concepts upon which all helping relationships are formed. These concepts then are used to support the presence of three types of relationships encountered when offering help: healing, support and habitual (or resistance). These three relationships are connected to each other but can also occur separate from each other. Under the healing relationship is a special type of relationship – the mystic relationship. The healing and mystic relationships have similar traits and they differ from the qualities associated with the support and the habitual relationships.

When offering help to another it is possible to experience all of these relationships types, maybe even within one meeting. It is also possible to experience just one during one meeting and an entirely different one during a second meeting. They are also interconnected. We need support to move past our barriers to a new understanding of well being. Once we find that new understanding we need support to build it into a way of living. It is also possible to gain insight into our personal well being directly from the healing and the mystic relationships. This experiential learning will need support, especially when it clashes with the habitual relationship. How we provide the support relationship is tied to our models of mind, change and relationship. We build a self constructed model of what it means to provide support as part of offering help to another. But seldom is this model closely examined, and its

connections and ramifications are even less explored. The series of books offered by this author is an example of building and examining a model of the helping relationship, including some of the connections.

The reader may not agree with all aspects of the model of helping that has been presented within this series of books. It is important to enter into discourse in an effort to head toward consensus regarding the definition and practice of compassion. It is important to examine the process of helping others, to see all the interconnections involved and the importance of dialog about compassion. We do have our own ideas of what it means to help another and these ideas will weave a web of interconnections through our lives and through the lives of those we meet. When we don't take the time to examine our ideas then we are also not examining the interconnections and the effects of those connections. This non examined process of helping others is, in this author's opinion, the key problem underlying poor quality support relationships in our society – from parenting, to teaching, to health care.

This is not to say that people do not have all of the best intentions. It just means that perhaps we can come to a stronger consensus about what a model of compassionate helping would look like – at least its core features. Perhaps in the search for the core features of compassionate helping we can open a dialog across disciplines, across cultures and across gender. Maybe we can come to some consensus on the basic features of compassionate helping and set the foundation for the development of a culture of compassion.