Standing Beside You

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Helping Without Losing Yourself

Michel Peen

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The fictional examples in this book illustrate practical situations. Names and events do not refer to existing case files.

The sample messages and worksheets may be copied for personal use when supporting someone close to you. Other reproduction or distribution requires the author’s permission.

Foreword

There is a letter on the table. Someone slides it towards you and asks, "Could you have a look?" You read it with them, find a telephone number or help write a reply. A week later, there is another letter. By now, you know who the contact person is. You keep an eye on a date. Before you realise it, you have become the person keeping track of everything.

Perhaps you do this for your mother, your partner, a friend or a neighbour. Perhaps you know from experience how difficult it can be to ask for help. You want to stop someone else getting stuck. That is an understandable reason to get involved. What nobody necessarily explains is how to help without taking on more and more responsibility.

This book is about that place beside someone. About listening when you already have a solution in mind. About opening a letter together without taking over the rest of the afternoon. About asking an organisation further questions while making sure the person concerned still understands what is happening. About boundaries you might wish you did not need, but which help you remain available.

You do not need to be a polished speaker to do this. Nor do you need to know every rule by heart. Attention, a few clear agreements and a willingness to say that you still need to find something out are more useful. A carefully framed question can achieve

more than a long letter full of words nobody would use around the kitchen table.

I believe help should remain understandable to the person receiving it. That is why this book contains short examples, questions and texts you can adapt. They do not take the other person's place. They help you choose a next step together that suits the situation.

You will also find passages about stopping, handing responsibilities back and bringing in other help. These are part of helping too. A person is not an inexhaustible resource. You can care about someone and need an evening to yourself. You can love someone dearly and still recognise that a particular task is more than you can take on.

Read this book in whatever way you can manage at the moment. If something is urgent, begin with that subject. If you are mainly exhausted, you could start with the chapter on boundaries. You do not have to complete every exercise. One agreement that people actually keep is worth more than twelve beautifully completed sheets left in a folder.

Michel Peen

How to use this book

This is a practical book for adults who help another adult in daily life, for example with correspondence, care needs or contact with organisations. Its focus is voluntary, informal support. Additional rules apply to children, compulsory care and formal Dutch arrangements such as full guardianship (curatele), protective financial administration (bewind) and personal welfare representation (mentorschap). Seek specialist advice about those situations. A general agreement from this book does not replace the rules that apply to them.

The situations and names in the chapters are fictional. They illustrate familiar questions; they are not accounts of real clients, relatives or case files. An outcome in an example is never a promise about another situation.

You can read from beginning to end or choose a subject. The first four chapters help you establish how you will work together. They are followed by chapters on keeping track of things, writing letters, contacting organisations and coordinating with other helpers. The final chapters discuss the demands of helping, difficulties in the relationship, professional support and gradually reducing your involvement.

At the back of the book are sample messages and worksheets. Always adapt names, facts and agreements to the circumstances. A sample message is not a ready-made formal objection, court appeal,

medical consent form or other formal submission. For those actions, check the current requirements, the correct submission channel and the deadline. Use only the information needed for the purpose.

The legal and organisational context of this book is the Netherlands. The English edition retains that context; references to Dutch services and procedures should not be treated as descriptions of the rules in another country. Where necessary, factual information has a source number in square brackets. The official information consulted is listed at the back, with a date. Rules, contact arrangements and local services can change. When a particular decision is involved, read the letter itself and seek advice if the consequences are significant.

In the Netherlands, call 112 immediately if there is a direct threat to life or another emergency requiring urgent assistance. An email or complaint is not the appropriate route. For medical problems that are not immediately life-threatening, a GP or, outside normal hours, an out-of-hours GP service can assess what help is needed. [7] Outside the Netherlands, use the emergency and healthcare services that apply where you are.

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CHAPTER 1

I want to help but where do I begin

Mila has offered to visit her neighbour Nora. Nora says her paperwork is a mess. Mila brings a ring binder, a set of dividers and a list of websites. She has decided they will begin by putting all the post in date order. But as soon as they sit down, Nora starts talking about a hospital visit. The binder stays closed.

After ten minutes, Mila feels impatient. Wasn't there a specific task to do? Nora, meanwhile, feels relieved that she can finally explain what happened. They are sitting at the same table, but their expectations differ. Unless they say so, Mila may leave feeling she has done nothing and Nora may feel she has talked too much again.

A good beginning therefore includes a conversation about the help itself. What does the person want today? What have you come expecting to do? How much time do you have? Comparing those expectations takes a few minutes. Those minutes can prevent a great deal of misunderstanding.

Ask what is needed today

Saying that someone needs help tells you little about what that help should look like. They may want you to listen. They may want you to read a letter aloud, write down an appointment or check something together. Sometimes the question is not yet clear. It can help to offer a few small possibilities: would you like to talk first, would you like me to read this with you, or shall we make a plan together?

Leave room after asking. You do not have to fill a silence with advice. Someone who has been putting off asking for help for months may need time to explain what they feel ashamed of. It may be something you did not expect. The difficulty may be less about the amount on a bill than the fear of a partner seeing it.

Then ask what they would like to have achieved by the end of your conversation. This makes the wish smaller and easier to recognise. Solving every problem is not a useful aim for one afternoon. Knowing which letter needs attention first may be.

You can also ask what they would rather not discuss today. That helps prevent one opened envelope turning unintentionally into an examination of their entire life. A conversation with a clear scope can feel safer than a broad offer to help with everything.

Be specific about what you can offer

A broad offer sounds warm: you can always come to me. Yet nobody knows what "always" means. In the middle of the night? While you are working? With which problems? Your offer becomes more dependable when you say what you can actually give. For example: I can spend an hour with you on Wednesday and help you understand two letters.

That may sound smaller than the concern you feel. But the clarity itself can be reassuring. The other person does not have to guess whether a request is too much. You do not later have to withdraw a promise you never meant to make so broadly.

Say what you do not yet know as well. If you know nothing about a particular scheme or rule, say so. You can look up the explanation together or ask a specialist. You do not have to hide uncertainty behind a confident tone. An honest question mark can be more helpful than a confident answer that later proves wrong.

Notice what is already working

When you see a pile of unopened post, it is easy to focus only on what is missing. Yet there is almost always something the person already manages. Perhaps they keep track of medical appointments. Perhaps they know exactly what each bill is for, but struggle to pay or reply. Perhaps they have a notebook containing important names.