

The Rule of Five: Avoiding Disagreements when Your Intent Was to Be Helpful

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Too often, a discussion that started out with one person trying to help another, ends with someone throwing up his or her hands in frustration, storming out of the room, shouting, "This is the thanks I get? I was only trying to be helpful! Just forget I said anything!"

It has been said, "The road to Hell is paved with positive intentions."

It is important to remember that although the intention of helping someone is positive, if the person receiving that intent does not want the help, she will feel pressured, unintelligent, and defensive. Those are perfect ingredients for the beginning of an argument.

An Easy Way to Avoid Getting Roped In

There is a simple way to avoid these well intentioned but extremely exasperating disagreements: **"The Rule of 5."**

To see how it works, we first have to understand the dynamics of a disagreement caused by an overly helpful spouse. Let's walk through a scenario where the parties were unaware of the rule and see how two loving people can escalate a daily irritation into a full-blown argument.

Our saga begins with Suzanne coming home from a long, exasperating, day at work. She's emotionally drained, physically tired, and wants nothing more than to climb into a hot bath.

Robert, loving husband that he is, greets her with a hug and says, "Hi Sweetie, looks like you've had a rough day. What's up?"

Suzanne wearily replies as she plops her purse on the couch and starts to remove her coat, "I had a miserable exchange with a client. I was trying to open a new account and everything possible went wrong. In the end, we got it done, but he complained to the manager that I was inept even though it wasn't my fault."

Robert, ever willing to try and improve the lot of his loving partner, suggests, "Did you tell your manager what really happened?"

"No, it was already 5:00. I just wanted to get home," she responds.

"You know," says Robert, "He really needs to know your side."

"I know," she says, "I'll fill him in tomorrow. I really don't want to think about it right now."

"Isn't he there until 6:00? You could call him now."

"Yes, he is. I just don't want to deal with it."

Robert, concerned his wife is avoiding the issue, presses onward, "Are you sure that's wise? Don't you want to make sure your reputation is OK?"

"Of course I do," she responds, "I work hard on my reputation. It's just that I can wait until tomorrow. An extra hour is no big thing."

"I disagree," he says. "If you want my advice, I find that if I'm in a bind, it's always best to fix it immediately. Why wait? Give me the phone, I'll call him for you."

"Robert, I appreciate your help but I don't want to talk to him right now. Just let me relax, OK?"

"Tell you what, you call him. I'll make dinner and then we can both unwind. How about that?"

Raising her voice, Suzanne responds, "I haven't even put my stuff down! I'm a grown woman. I know what to do. I'll take care of it when I want to take care of it! Just leave me alone for a few moments, OK?"

Robert, hurt and angry, replies to the back of Suzanne's head as she's exiting the room, "Wow, that'll teach me to help. See if I try and be supportive again!"

He storms into to the living room, puts on the TV and sits in silence. Suzanne goes to the bedroom, kicks off her shoes, and collapses on to the bed. So goes the remainder of the night. Despite Robert's sincere desire to help his wife and create a warm environment for the evening, this night ends in a chilly frost, with both parties angry and isolated.

What went wrong?

The first problem is Suzanne was not "broken." She made decisions she felt were appropriate and didn't feel the desire to adjust. Robert,

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on the other hand, did not like to see his wife in pain, and had some suggestions he felt would be helpful. When Suzanne's ideas clashed with Robert's intentions, the result was an explosion.

Sometimes, the key to a peaceful evening might be avoidance. However, repeated withholding of feelings in an open relationship can cause resentment and distance. So, a balance must be found. That's where the "Rule of 5" helps.

How to use the Rule of Five

Consider each statement, question, or comment to count as one transaction. The two keys to a peaceful, yet still supportive, exchange are:

- 1) Stop before you get to five transactions**
- 2) Ask questions before volunteering solutions**
- 3) Leave the door open for further communication**

Let's visit Robert and Suzanne again, this time watching how the "Rule of 5" limits the problem.

Suzanne enters the house, still as frustrated as in the first scenario.

Robert, loving husband that he is, greets her with a hug and says, "Hi Sweetie, looks like you've had a rough day. What's up?"

Suzanne tells him the whole ugly story.

Robert asks a question, "Anything I can do to help?" (Note: this is the first transaction. He has asked to help her. He is not volunteering advice.)

Suzanne replies, "No, I just want to be left alone. I could use some space." (That's the second transaction.)

Robert understands that sometimes people say they don't want help because they don't want to be a burden, or they're not really sure you want to help. Therefore, he asks one more time, "You sure? I'd be glad to help if you need anything." (That is now the third transaction. Basically, he just restated what he did before. He is not putting pressure on Suzanne, just letting her know that he was sincere and by restating the question, she might have heard it differently. It also gives her time to reconsider should she want to.)

Suzanne replies with transaction number four, "No, I know you want to help. I've got it worked out. I'm going to take a bath."

Here is where the Rule of 5 shows its power. If Robert engages in transaction number five by offering assistance yet again or by overriding his wife's desire for space, he is now being pushy. It is no longer about him trying to be helpful; it is now about him subconsciously telling her she's not smart enough to do it on her own. It's also become more about him trying to avoid his own discomfort of her raw feelings, rather than help her.

However, one doesn't want to see others in pain. Therefore, he doesn't just walk away. Instead, he replies, "OK, Honey. I'm here if you need me. Let me know if I can do anything for you."

Robert continues about his evening or changes the subject (possibly with a hug for his wife). Suzanne gets the time to unwind and bring up the subject later (if she so chooses). Bottom line, both people get a more peaceful evening and the relationship is more balanced.

Before you try and "fix" something that does not need fixing, remember the old joke:

"How many boy scouts did it take to help the old lady across the street?"

"10 — she didn't want to go."