

Feeling Unappreciated?

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“Jane” is a regular volunteer who has faithfully visited an elderly woman, “Louise,” once a week for nearly a year. For the last two out of three scheduled visits, Louise had forgotten to tell Jane she had other commitments and did not seem at all apologetic for the mix-up. When she stopped and thought about it, Louise had never really openly expressed appreciation for Jane’s visits. Though proud of her dedication, Jane has recently experienced an uncomfortable set of conflicted feelings or “parts” of herself. The “devoted” part maintains an unwavering commitment to Louise and appreciates her difficulties as a homebound grandmother whose family lives hundreds of miles away. The “resentful” part has recently come to feel hurt, underappreciated and even a little angry at Louise for rarely expressing her gratitude, no matter how much time Jane spends with her. Finally, there is Jane’s “guilty” part that thinks: “How dare I have resentments to this poor, elderly lady who is so lonely. How could I be so self-centered to make it about me?”

It’s Perfectly Normal

While the situations and personalities certainly differ, many volunteers experience a range of emotions while dedicating their time and energy towards others. In fact, it is more normal than not to feel ambivalence, no matter what our undertaking, amidst the jumble of varying thoughts and emotions, known as our “parts.” According to noted family therapist and author, Richard Schwartz, everyone has sub-personalities or “parts” that serve important protective functions and each of these parts has separate needs (Schwartz, R.C., 1995, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*. New York: The Guilford Press). So, the question is, as dedicated volunteers, how do we deal with the needs of our angry or resentful parts? Just as we would not try to silence a friend who needed to vent from time to time, we also need to give voice to our own “parts” and work to support them.

Hear Them Out

One way to do this is to take a moment and think about exactly what has been causing you frustration, resentment, feeling of being taken for granted, etc. As you think about these things, unabashedly include everything from your

smallest to your largest gripes. When you've finished with this thought process...take a moment and imagine what behavior you would have hoped for or expected from the person with whom you work. Finally, stop and think about any obstacles that might prevent that person from actually expressing those reinforcing sentiments to you. Emotional Intelligence research (Goleman, D., Ph.D., *Emotional intelligence: why it can matter more than IQ*. New York, New York, 1995, Bantam Books) shows that our emotional brain calms faster when responding to sincere curiosity versus blame, a good reason to seek further information about the other person's behavior. By asking yourself what some of the reasons might be that may stand in the way of this person's ability to show gratitude, you may find yourself awakened to a new understanding. Perhaps you'll discover that a good reason the person is unable to express appreciation relates to their fear of experiencing vulnerability when they acknowledge how much you mean to them, particularly adding to the many losses they may have already sustained. This information may reduce your frustration and quell your resentful part.

What Goes Around

Another way to work with these feelings is to think of a time in your life when someone gave selflessly to you without expecting anything at all in return. Perhaps you were too young at the time to understand or didn't realize until later how much they had given or sacrificed on your behalf. You might not have expressed appreciation at the time, and they never let on that they expected it. You received without apparent judgment. This will remind you of the "Pay it Forward" concept and the idea that giving and receiving do not always naturally balance between the same two people

Think Again

Finally, one of the most effective antidotes to an emotional hijack is to strengthen appreciation. When all else fails, go back to the original reason for taking this volunteer job. Likely, the rich rewards you have garnered from your dedication and sacrifice are many, and you have grown as a result. Here, along with some understandable gripes, the gratitude can be all yours.