

## Why Look After Yourself?

“Look after yourself” is something we commonly say to people as we take our leave. It’s an expression that has a caring and supportive ring to it because it as if the speaker is saying “Now you must look after yourself, since I won’t be there to look after you”. In the absence of another to take care of us, of course we must look after ourselves, that much is evident. However, how should we respond when someone is present, and offering to look after us?

All of us, perhaps, us harbour the fantasy of being looked after. How comforting to be taken up by a caring other! How wonderful to relinquish the responsibility for ourselves! Of course, it is true that none of us would have survived the first few years of life without being taken care of. In times of stress and anguish we yearn to return to that early experience again.

Even the most well intentioned helping relationship has great potential for generating resentment. Somewhere at the back of their minds both parties will know that something has been given without fair return. Thoughts of being taken advantage of will often slip into even the most benign of helpers’ minds, whilst the person who has been helped will be left with an unpleasant feeling of indebtedness.

If we take more than we receive from the world then there is an imbalance. The awareness of this fact corrodes our sense of self-respect and our self-belief. We are diminished by the act of receiving unless we can also give. The drama of the one-way gift is the cause of much happiness, especially amongst those who seem to need help most, for example children or people with disabilities. The help they perhaps need most of all is help to help others. Our experience of being self-responsible is coloured by how we were parented, and how the transition from care-taker to care-giver happened. If we were fortunate, the transition was gradual, with opportunities to experiment and take a step back if the challenges of life seemed too great at the time. For most of us the transition will have been erratic. There will have been times when care-givers were absent or withholding, or times when they persisted in giving care in response to their own need to give rather than our need to take. In either case, our ability to sustain ourselves emotionally will have been compromised. There are moments of opportunity in psychological growth that close whether or not the developmental task has been accomplished. Many children do not move seamlessly from dependence to independence. Like most psychological wounds, the wounds resulting from being either neglected or pampered help us form bonds of empathy and compassion with others. This is why so many people who choose careers in care work carry such wounds. In times of difficulty these wounds open up again and cause distress.

Our responsibility as care-givers, be it in the role of parents, teachers, friends, or therapists is to offer help sparingly. We should help not as much as we can, but as little as necessary. Our responsibility to ourselves is to take care of themselves as much as we can, especially when there is someone else offering to take care of us.