



A hard lesson in learning how to ask others for help

Did you ever have one of those days when you are smiling and feeling blessed to be alive? I had one of those days last spring. I had spent the week skiing with my family in the beautiful mountains of Maine. During the last run of the last day, I skied off the chairlift and breathed in the cool mountain air while smiling at my companions. I headed down the easy slope to the lodge, thinking to myself that this was the perfect end to the perfect week. First turn, nice and easy. Second turn, nice and smooth. Third turn, and BAM!

Before I knew it, I was down on the ground. A young girl, about 14 years old, stood over me apologizing. She was so sorry that she had hit me and knocked me over from behind. “No problem,” I told her. I stood up, a bit wobbly, and then immediately collapsed. It was evident that I couldn’t stand, let alone walk or ski. I was dumfounded. I could not believe this was happening. I had been a skier for more than 20 years. Sure, I’d fallen before, but I could always stand up and ski on. But not this time.

I swallowed my pride and rode down the slope in the ski patrol sled. I wondered how this could have happened to me. I’m so cautious. I wear my helmet. I take lessons every year to make sure that my technique is current and safe. I don’t ski terrain that is above my ability level. Yet here I was, riding in a ski patrol sled. How humiliating.

When I got to the bottom of the hill, I could neither stand nor walk without assistance. I had to go to the hospital. Several tests later, my diagnosis was confirmed: The ligaments in my knee were destroyed and would have to be replaced. Two weeks later I had surgery, and for the following eight weeks I was hobbling around on crutches.

I called my supervisor at the counseling center where I work. We offer counseling services to those who cannot afford standard fees or who don’t have insurance, such as the working

poor and the unemployed. I had graduated the previous year with my master’s degree, and I had passed my licensing exam the previous October. After I relayed the story of what had happened to my supervisor, she rescheduled my appointments.

On my first day back after the surgery, I was conflicted. What would I say to my clients? I had been taught in school that self-disclosure is often inappropriate in the counseling session. However, this situation was a challenge. What do you say to a client who asks, “What happened?” as you hobble on crutches to open the door and welcome her into the counseling session? After all, when you’re so obviously wounded, the psychoanalytic approach of “Why do you ask?” seems absurd. Yet the session is about the client, not the counselor.

I became very aware of the fine line between appropriate and inappropriate self-disclosure. When clients asked about my injury, I could feel the urge within me to relate the story of my accident in great detail. With the support and counsel of my supervisor, I kept my answers short and became an expert at saying: “I had an accident. But tell me, what’s on your mind today?” I also became very adept at welcoming clients into the counseling session, navigating to a chair, sitting down and tucking my crutches behind me. In one instance, as I stood up to walk a client to the door at the end of a counseling session, she said, “Oh, I forgot. You’re still on crutches.” With that remark, I felt that I was on the right track. My crutches had become irrelevant, forgotten, invisible.

Still, there were other clients whose comments I will never forget. Maggie, for example, was dating a man who was demanding. He was a drinker and liked her to cater to his needs. In one of our sessions, she said, “It’s like I lean on him like a crutch. Like I need him to stand. That without him, I can’t stand on my own two feet.”

Would she have come to this realization on her own? Did my crutches, on some subconscious level, provide a metaphor that enabled her to see her dependency on this man? A dependency she relied upon to keep her steady on her own two feet?

Then there was Jim, who remarked on his wife’s affair by saying, “It’s like your knee. Trust is like that. You have it, and everything is fine. But it can be broken in an instant. And it takes a long, long time to heal. And you know, it will never be like it was before. It may look like it’s healed, but there will always be a scar.” Will Jim ever forgive his wife? Will he be able to trust her again? Will he heal, or will he forever be scarred by her unfaithfulness?

Maureen and Neil were in couples counseling working through the financial problems in their marriage. For the two months I was on crutches, Neil would ask the same question at each session without ever waiting for my answer: “You will ski again, won’t you? You see, honey? She doesn’t let life get her down. She gets up and moves on and skis again. Right. (Turning toward me) You are going to ski again, aren’t you?”

I didn’t respond with either a “yes” or a “no.” Instead, each time I reflected back his interest in whether I would ski again. Through this interaction, I understood how hard it was for Maureen to say “no” to Neil. Everything he said was so positive. Yet he wasn’t listening. He was telling her that his way of seeing a situation was the only way. I wonder, would I have known that about this couple if I had not been on crutches? Will positive thinking solve their financial problems?

There were clients whose healing paralleled my own. Tyronne was a recovering alcoholic and drug addict who had been sober for 10 months. He said, “I’m slowly getting better, just like you, taking one step and one day at a time.” He was living at home with his parents. During our session right after I

relinquished my crutches and was again walking unassisted, he told me that he had placed a deposit on an apartment and was moving out of his parent’s house. Tyronne no longer needed the support of his parents, and I no longer needed the support of my crutches.

I wonder if my injury did more harm than good for one client, however. Janice was depressed. Her most recent boyfriend had broken up with her, and she was finding it hard to get out of bed each morning. During one of our sessions she said, “I don’t know how you do it. You get out of bed and you’re getting better. I don’t ever see myself getting better. I’m just not like you.” I pointed out to Janice that she *had* gotten out of bed and she was on the road to getting better. Shortly thereafter, however, Janice missed an appointment. She didn’t return my phone calls, and I haven’t seen her since. Did my physical improvement represent something she felt too depressed to attempt to achieve? Would another counselor have served her better? Should I have been able to predict this incident and refer her to someone else?

In addition to what I learned about counseling from my accident, I learned some things about myself. First and foremost, I do not like to ask for help. I prefer to do things for myself. However, three months of not walking required me to overcome some of my reluctance to ask for assistance.

Once, I hobbled to the kitchen on my crutches and retrieved a bottle of water from the refrigerator. Since I needed my hands to maneuver the crutches, I couldn’t hold the bottle of water. So I clenched the cap of the bottle in my mouth and headed back to the living room. My husband met me in the dining room. As he yanked the bottle of water out of my mouth, he asked, “What are you doing?”

“I wanted some water,” I replied.

“Yeah,” he said, “but if you trip and fall with that bottle in

your mouth, you could choke!”

“I know, I know,” I said a little sheepishly.

“You know, I would have gotten the water for you. All you had to do was ask.”

“That’s the problem,” I admitted. “I don’t like to ask for help.”

“Well,” he replied, “get over it. You’re on crutches, and you need help.”

I guess that being in a “helping” profession, I feel very comfortable assisting others, yet somehow, I have a hard time asking for assistance myself. It occurred to me how brave my clients are when they call the counseling center for the first time, admitting that they need help and asking for that initial appointment. It takes a lot of courage to admit when we need the help of others.

Now, however, I find myself feeling very grateful. I can walk and I can drive. I have family, friends and co-workers who are more than willing to help me when I need assistance, and I know that I have the strength to admit when I need help. I have a renewed respect for my clients and the courage they exhibit in taking those first tentative steps toward seeking help and changing their lives for the better. I even have some new clients who have no idea that I recently recuperated from major surgery.

I am also looking forward to cooler weather and getting back on the ski slope. It is time to stretch my limits and muster the courage to ski again. With the help and support of my family and friends, I am confident that, very soon, I will once more be having one of *those* days. ■

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