

TRAINING PARTNERS TO BE HELPFUL

Some relationships feel like all give and no get. The flexible nurturing and receiving that flows back and forth in a healthy relationship becomes stuck in master/slave or thankless/martyred roles. Often, “givers” think that if *they* just give enough, others will follow their example. Because they anticipate others’ needs, they think people should be equally capable of foreseeing theirs. When givers finally do ask for help, often it is done with so much complaining that others don’t feel like responding. They know that after all the nagging, givers will end up taking care of things themselves. The truth is that giving is *not* a sign of love and caring—it is a sign of *good training*! There is much that givers can do to teach people around them to be more thoughtful:¹

1. Set limits on how much you give: This is the first step to getting more help! Simply stop doing some things and find out how long it takes others to pick up the ball.
2. Be specific: Do not say “I’d like you to care more.” Say “Would you ask about my day, give me a hug, or wash my feet?” Choices and absurd requests help.
3. Break the problem into small, achievable steps: What is the first thing your partner could do to help you to trust him or her more?
4. Make direct requests: Say, “Would you . . .?” This helps others make a commitment to do something.
5. Do not make statements or orders: “. . . needs to be done” and “I would like you to . . .” are statements. “Get me the . . .” is an order and causes resentment.
6. Give your partner the choice to refuse: The more freedom people have to say “No,” the more likely they will say “Yes.” Asking, “Would you . . .?” suggests that freedom. “Could you . . .?” asks if they are able and implies that if they can do something, they should.
7. Ask with one short question without giving a list of reasons to justify requests. The latter sounds demanding or manipulative.
8. Practice accepting “No” graciously by making some unreasonable requests so you can simply say, “That’s OK. No problem.”
9. Practice asking properly for things others are likely to do before asking for things that will stretch them.
10. When others do what you ask, show appreciation! You can even appreciate things they haven’t done as though they have. Saying, “You’ve really been putting away your dishes more lately” is a wonderful reminder.
11. Ask in a trusting manner, as if you believe your partner will really do it.
12. When your partner forgets to do something, just ask again without making a fuss—“I’m sure you meant to. Would you do it tomorrow?”
13. Don’t require other to want to do things to be helpful. When their initial response is to grumble, remember that they’re in the first stage of considering your request. Listen quietly and trust them to work through their struggle.
14. When other refuse to do something, ask once more, with only one reason why your desire is important or simplify your request. Then, if they decline, accept graciously.

¹ Some strategies for partner training are adapted from *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* by John Gray (HarperCollins, 1992).