

Why Saying 'Let Me Know if There's Anything I Can Do to Help' is Not Actually Helpful

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you."

In our society, it's practically required to say this when a fellow human being tells you they're going through a hard time. I've said it. You've probably said it. And what did it achieve? Not a whole lot, I'm guessing.

I would know. For most of the last six months, I've been in the position of needing help. I had a serious health crisis and then our family moved to another continent. I heard "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you" dozens of times. My conclusion is that it's usually pointless and sometimes even counterproductive.

There were a few instances when I suspected a person who said it wasn't being 100% sincere. Maybe they were just bowing to social convention. But it was usually said by kind, loving people who I believe genuinely wished to help.

The phrase "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you" probably gained social traction because it seems to respect the other person's space. You're not imposing anything. You're just letting them know you're there if they need you.

But think about it: when you say "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you" (should I abbreviate that to LMKITAICDTHP?) you're putting the onus on the other person to find a way that you could help them. This is, by definition, a person who is going through a hard time. They already have enough on their plate.

It also means the other person has to subsequently reach out to you to ask for the help. This could work with very close friends but it's quite a hurdle when it comes to acquaintances. For example, a good way to help someone who is moving is to offer to bring them a meal. In our final week in our last house, our pans were packed up so my husband took our kids to the Burger King drive-through nearly every day. Would I have called up a casual friend and said, "Hey! So you offered to help. Could you cook dinner for my family and bring it over?" No, I wouldn't. That would feel rude and pushy, and Burger King is just a mile down the road.

After awhile, all those offers of "anything I can do to help" actually became a source of stress to me. I felt bad when I didn't take these sweet people up on their offers. Was I being rude? Would they think I didn't like them?

So the next time you meet a person who needs help, I recommend that you think of a specific thing you could do for them. Even if they don't need what you offer, it may encourage them to think of something else.

And don't be discouraged if you're only able to offer something small. As Edmund Burke once observed, "Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could only do a little."

A few days ago, I met an old friend of my husband's. She has children the same age as mine and offered to babysit so I could organize my new home. I appreciated her being so specific. The challenges of moving to a new country can be pretty daunting. Her offer to give me a free afternoon might seem insignificant but it warmed my heart and relieved my stress a little.

And maybe it conferred similar benefits on her. Scientific [studies](#) have shown that when you help another person you're also helping yourself. It can lift your mood, make you more

socially outgoing, and generally improve your outlook on the world.

I've resolved to never say "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help you" again. And I hope you'll join me. If you feel moved to help someone, offer something specific. Otherwise maybe it's better to just not offer at all.

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