

Helping For Change

Allen Neuringer and Kathryn C. Oleson
Reed College

You have been worrying about global warming and wanting to change some ways in which you contribute to it. But you continue to add too much carbon to the atmosphere—when you heat or cool your house, drive your car, or purchase goods. A long chain of responses is required to get from a state of concern to new habits, and you've found yourself stuck, doing things as you always have. Consider this: Helping another person can be a powerful method for changing your own behavior. To begin the process, seek occasions to help another change in a way consistent with your goals.

“How does helping someone else change *me*?” you ask. The answer is paradoxical on the surface, but is based on the potency of social contingencies, those that involve relationships between you and others. We'll describe one scenario as a model and then explain why helping for change can be a useful tool for modifying behavior, including your own.

At a dinner party, your friend Jim mentions that he has been thinking about installing a solar heating, cooling, and hot water system in his house but doesn't know much about what he'd need to buy, how to find a contractor, reasonable costs, and so on. Jim's interest is an opportunity for you to apply helping-for-change principles. You indicate similar interests and offer to join him in learning about solar energy and the process of

installing solar panels. If Jim responds positively, that provides the impetus for you to gather information (e.g., do a Web search on private-house solar systems, obtain library books, check out local solar-panel distributors). Weeks of occasional contacts follow, and at some point the two of you visit a local contractor who tells you about the various state and federal tax incentives, something you had known little about. We can continue the scenario, possibly to a desirable conclusion, but the important point is that, beginning with Jim's expression of interest and your offering of assistance, *you* have become engaged with solar energy and have thereby increased the probability that you'll *both* eventually install solar panels.

Let's briefly analyze why.

You may be more likely to accept at face value Jim's stated interest than your own, because you are well aware of your previous failures to change and have worries about the cost and time it would take to carry out such a project. You know more about your own inabilities and insecurities than about Jim's, and it is therefore easier (and more likely) for you to start the process when focused on Jim than on yourself.

Discussions with Jim highlight the inconsistency between your offer of assistance and your past behavior, and this can be helpful. There is experimental evidence that prosocial or proenvironmental activities become more likely when one discusses the benefits of such behavior, especially while honestly acknowledging past inaction (Stone & Fernandez, 2008).

Initial steps in a lengthy task are especially vulnerable to interruption.

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Address correspondence to Allen Neuringer (e-mail: aneuring@reed.edu) or Kathryn Oleson (e-mail: koleson@reed.edu).

We often say “I’d like to —” or “I’m thinking about doing —” but then fail to follow up. Two problems are involved. The first is a lack of correspondence between what we say and what we actually do. Many of us are in the habit of not following our own verbal commitments to change, but the good news is that we can learn to “do what I say I’ll do” when following through is reinforced (Da Silva & Lattal, 2010; Rogers-Warren & Baer, 1976). The second problem is that other behaviors often intrude at the point of initiating a task, whether it is to write a paper, to exercise, or to limit carbon emissions (Schlinger, Derronne, & Baron, 2008; Staddon & Simmelhag, 1971). Rather than letting the dinner conversation devolve into other topics or activities, your continued assistance can help Jim through these first steps, and his responses can do the same for you. Once over the difficulty of getting started, as you engage in more and more of the activities related to your goal, the chances of continuing will increase, a phenomenon referred to as *soft commitment* (Siegel & Rachlin, 1995). A series of actions towards a goal helps to maintain continuing efforts.

Throughout the process, social interactions contribute to sustained interest. For example, telling Jim that you’ve acquired new information about solar panels serves as a discriminative cue that reminds him of what he intended to do. Or the information you mailed to him provides the occasion for his next responses, which in turn serve to reinforce *your* continuing efforts. As we work toward a distant goal, our focus often wanes, and the stimuli and reinforcers provided by our collaborators help to prompt and maintain the desired course of action. Many experimental examples of observational and social learning show how activities by one individual engender similar actions by others,

especially when the modeled behavior is reinforced (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Laland, 2004). Cooperative performances towards a shared goal provide additional reinforcers (Schuster, 2002; Slavin, 1995).

Coaction has other desirable consequences. For example, given that you intend to share information with Jim, you are more likely to digest that information in a way that can be explained to another because, as Seneca wrote 2,000 years ago, “We learn by teaching” (see Maheady, Mallette, & Harper, 2006).

The act of assisting another can reinforce the helper as well as the recipient (Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). For example, Dunn, Aknin, and Norton (2008) gave one group of participants money to spend on themselves (pay a bill, buy something for themselves) and another group an equal amount to spend on someone else (give the money to charity, purchase a gift for a friend). Those in the “help another” group reported a greater increase in feelings of happiness at the end of the day than those in the “help themselves” group. Helping others may provide reinforcement for maintaining your own efforts to change.

Another beneficial consequence of social collaboration derives from the mutual and interactive contingencies involved. Some of these may be explicitly stated, such as “If you succeed in installing a solar panel, I’ll take you to dinner” or “If both of us find information within 2 weeks, we’ll meet for a beer” (Neuringer, 1988). Other interactive contingencies flow naturally from the joint effort. For instance, Allen (the senior author) and Martha Neuringer have been working with a small group of Oregonians for 2 years to stop the importation of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the Middle East and Russia. LNG has a 30% higher carbon footprint than domestic gas, and its importation helps to maintain dependence for energy supplies on

foreign countries. It also competes with the development of alternative environmentally friendly sources of energy, such as solar, wind, and geothermal. Organizing against powerful energy companies takes much time, money, and energy, and the outcome is far from certain, but the actions of each group member serve to generate continued participation and engagement by other group members, and many hundreds of Oregonians have become involved. Coaction helps to maintain individual action.

We have described some of the principles that underlie the helping-for-change procedure, but many others may contribute: Reinforcement of even the smallest steps is important, especially early in the process; punishment, negativity, and overly critical reactions can sabotage change; permitting the other person to choose what to do next or how to go about the task will increase his or her commitment; and honesty concerning what you are trying to accomplish is necessary so as not to jeopardize the interaction. More generally, knowledge about the types of behavior–environment interactions that maintain environmentally destructive behaviors (Skinner, 1987) and about basic behavior-change techniques (Pryor, 1999) can enhance helping-for-change attempts.

The helping-for-change method can be extended to groups such as service organizations; churches, synagogues, and mosques; family and neighborhood groupings; classrooms and schools. Individuals in a socially active group can seek to identify the changes desired by other members and then offer to be helping-for-change agents. The group can provide positive consequences to both the givers and receivers of help. The goal is for numerous individuals within the group to accomplish things that are valuable to all. And, of course, many of the consequences of coaction—modeling, mutual rein-

forcement, progress toward a goal—would be highlighted for all members.

Various Web sites provide additional tools for implementing the helping-for-change approach. Some seek to facilitate community involvement and engagement in general (e.g., www.bettertogether.org); others focus particularly on climate change (e.g., www.350.org; www.acespace.org/dot; <http://portland.1thingus.com/>; www.energysavers.gov/); and some provide general resources to assist in making desired behavioral changes (www.treehugger.com; www.doityourself.com).

Changing behavior by offering to help is not a magic pill. You need to wait for opportunities, although you can increase their likelihood by initiating conversations on appropriate topics. You may be unable to assist because the issue is too technical. Jim's interest may wane more rapidly than your ability to reinforce it. Jim's spotty participation may not maintain your efforts, and you may lack the skill to get him going. His reactions may punish your attempts to help him, and you might unintentionally do the same to him, causing your interactions to suffer or cease altogether. The helping-for-change process increases the likelihood of success; it does not guarantee it.

Still, helping others to change can be a way to change both our own and others' behavior. It works because we are, at heart, social beings who, when we work together, can meet the most difficult challenges. Global warming tops the list.

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