The Helper's Dance List

Introduction

This paper reviews a checklist (appended) of twenty typical interactions that can affect the helping relationship. Each item is a small prompt or dialogue button to open-up thinking about aspects of our relationship with giving or receiving help. They point to shared patterns of interaction whether the focus is on the caring relationship, the therapeutic relationship, the consultative relationship, the treatment or supervisory relationship. It applies to work individually or in groups. Thus, according to the context, readers might replace the title the helper's dance list, with the teachers, carer's, supervisor's, doctor's, parent's, nurse's or therapist's dance list.

Several uses of the list are summarised. These are concerned with promoting relational thinking along the lines described in the chapter on relational intelligence in this book and go together with the skills of making maps of patterns of interaction using the methods of cognitive analytic therapy (Ryle and Kerr 2002).

Helping can be a complicated relationship

When we try to help we enter a complex set of relationships between people, roles, goals and feelings. It is hard to hold all this in mind and we tend to look for one line of action at a time and simple ways of seeing things. When we have difficulty, we try to be more understanding, or we might wonder what we are doing wrong or blame the person for not being motivated.   It is easy to lose perspective as we get immersed in the detail of helping. Several of the Helper's dance list questions address this such as Question 20: "**Where were we?** I can get so involved sorting out the relationship I forget the reason for meeting." Or: Question 6: "**Lose perspective:** I get so involved in the detail I forget the big picture. We can be pulled in to saying to ourselves: "Let's get on with it, forget that psychological stuff. Help me sort this out." Or dances like the following highlighted by Question 1: **Never good enough:** I have high expectations of myself which makes me think my help won't be good enough, others will be disappointed, and I will cope by trying even harder.

Name the dance, don't blame the dancer

The idea of dance brings to the fore a sense of helping as a joint activity with a range of ways of carrying out the help, and of styles of participation in the help.   The aim is to offer an open, reflective but not intrusive framework for noticing when, how and why we join, or create, an unhelpful dance. If we can be more confident in noticing the dance we are in, it is easier to name it in constructive ways and negotiate a better outcome with everyone involved. The challenge is to name the dance we are in but before we do that we need to build sensitivity and skill to noticing that there is a dance. This includes the mood music around the dance and the step by step moves that make up the detailed interaction for those involved. A key skill in helping is to name the dance without blaming the dancer. The focus is on saying: this is something we are doing which **we** can understand and change rather than making **you** or **me** the focus of blame for instigating the dance.

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Change the dance

In these helper's dances, we can easily be so entangled in one style of helping that we neglect, or don't see the need, to talk about the process of helping and the changing quality of the helping relationship between us. Often this is because talking about the relationship in the here and now is uncomfortable, feels a little unnatural and of uncertain outcome and not so commonly done with satisfactory results in everyday life.

For example, see Question 19 in the dance list: "**Not here, not now:** I see the need to talk about what is happening between us but find it unpredictable or embarrassing and tend to wait and miss the moment to name it."

In this manner we can understandably fall into some version of saying to ourselves: "don't go there." Whether this is wise or not is an important part of self-reflection, but we need to notice and name the dance before we can negotiate our choice of action. Our patterns of relating, especially our more personal and informal ones, are based on procedural knowledge and ways of reciprocating laid down in our earliest years of life. This procedural knowledge is something we can become more, kindly and actively aware of through such techniques as relational mapping. But also, it is what Jean Knox in her book Self-Agency in Psychotherapy (2011) describes as co-embodied knowing that is implicitly mapped from the motor parts of our brain. This fits well with the metaphor of the helper's relationship as a dance where in there is simultaneously a more deliberative process of making moves across the dance floor and a more intuitive trusting in the rhythm of the footwork. When we stop and reflect on our patterns of helping, it is an opportunity to see the link between our more explicit and chosen responses and those the automatically kick in like the steps to a dance.

Caution and a certain amount of reserve is also built into our professional, family or friendship roles as helpers. To know how to help is simultaneously to know how to be helped. We know both the giving and receiving ends of the role of helper. As in the adjoining relational diagram the helper needs to know what it feels like to be in the helped position otherwise it can become a one-way relationship of doing help to someone. Our aim as helpers along with solving problems is to help the person be a better helper of themselves and other people. In solving a specific problem, we also learn a general lesson about how to be helpful to self and others.

The helper needs to know what it feels like to be helped
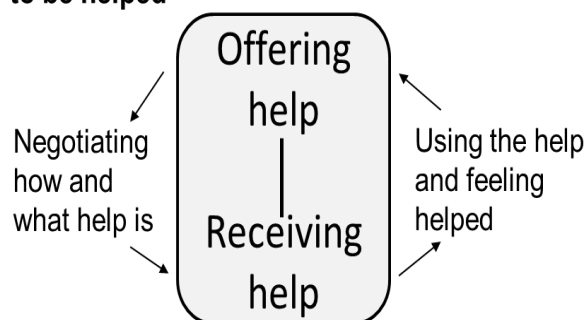
Several the dances address this dilemma as we struggle between personal and professional sides of ourselves. For example, Question 3: **Genuine and vulnerable or safe but less real: either (a) I show feelings and feel genuine but somewhat** vulnerable or (b) I safely hide feelings, appear professional but less the real me. Or in a separate way Question 13: **Jump in or hold back**: either a) I am in at the deep end as a helper and tend to give my all or b) I am not so involved and hold back, miss the moment to help or watch on from the side-lines. The person being helped has their own parallel version of these patterns as captured by the 'experiencing help' version of the checklist also appended.

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These dances each have their distinctive kinds of music and detailed steps which are hard to notice in the blur of active involvement in helping. They are familiar and typical patterns which can be compassionately described in accurate detail and used to increase awareness and develop negotiating skills to change the helper's dance. Much of the help, regardless of the methods we use, the roles we have, or the setting in which we work depends on working together to establish and maintain the helping relationship. The content or focus of help often goes wrong because the process of helping has gone wrong. Or in the words of this paper we thought we were doing one dance but in fact we were doing another one.

The 'one third' rule of thumb

At the core of the idea of the helper's dance list is the idea of shared responsibility and the notion that more or less, 'one third' of the dance is being led by the client, one third by the therapist, or helper's stuff and one third by the system, model, context or surrounding culture etc. This simple rule challenges us not put all the blame on the system or on the client or on ourselves. Instead we should wonder at the relational dynamics in play.

A scaffolding for building a reflective discussion

Reflecting on the process of helping is not something which we can do on our own. Even the most seasoned helper needs a bit of back up in terms of theory and a scaffolding that can guide them to building an open way of negotiating how the relationship is going. When we do focus on the helping relationship there are six different approaches which need combining and integrating but are often used as if they can stand on their own. In a very summarised and simplified form these are:

- the psychoanalytic approach with its focus on the listening relationship and the push and pull of transference feelings from elsewhere on to the helper to be explored in the room

- the behavioural approach with its micro attention to push and pull of a sequence of behaviours.

- the interpersonal approach with its focus on skilled communication and sensitively creating a collaborative and reflective relationship

- the humanistic approach with its focus on genuineness and authentic, holistic, human-to-human encounter

- the problem-solving approach with its practical focus on solutions, coaching and self esteem

- a cognitive approach with its focus on ways of making meaning.

- The narrative approach with its focus on re-storying and rewording problems, past and present experience of help.

- The cognitive relational thinking approach with its focus on seeing our relationship with patterns of thoughts and beliefs.
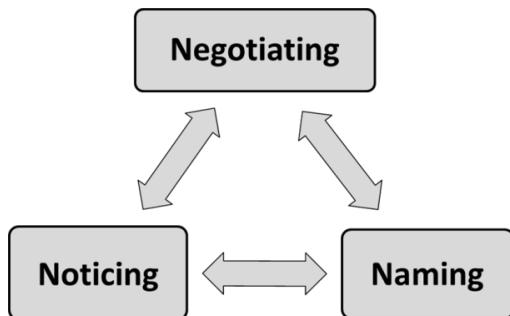
Sticking to any one of these approaches has the benefit of giving the helper a clear framework but at the risk of narrowing how the helping relationship is managed and understood. From a relational and dialogic point of view each of these approaches has a part to play in orchestrating a full

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understanding of the how, what and why of establishing, maintaining and sharing help. The helper's dance list contains elements of all of them and offers a hook for reflection and discussion of how patterns of helping are noticed, named and negotiated. A fuller account of integrating these five approaches is beyond the remit of these pages.

Negotiating, Noticing and Naming

It is useful in working together with the list of helper's dances to think of the three-way relationship between noticing, naming and negotiating things. The relationship is three-way in that we must first notice what is happening. This may arise through a feeling, an incident or a gesture between participants to the helping relationship. Naming what we notice is a delicate process of finding the words to describe both what we are noticing and how we are noticing it at the same time. It is easy in naming what we notice to be too direct. Whilst being direct on some occasions is essential it often stops the subtle process of jointly naming and renaming what we notice. As the words take shape and find their voice (a process of mutual exchange made infinitely easier by mapping to help discussion), more is noticed but also a quality of collaboration can be built up in how we negotiate a shared understanding. In this way noticing, naming and negotiating might be described as meta-dance that can help us connect with and go beyond our unwitting participation in helpful and unhelpful dances.

Hindsight really is a wonderful thing

It is not easy to achieve awareness of the helping relationship in the thick of helping someone. When things are not working, it is very tempting to blame the client or the system or blame oneself. We can benefit from a checklist that helps us to see quickly what might be going on, develop our self-awareness and not go leaping from the frying pan into the fire when things get too hot to handle. It is a familiar lament that I can see what was going wrong now (a few hours or days later) so clearly but I had no sense of it there and then in the thick of it. We are quite good a spotting our mistakes in retrospect. Hindsight really is a wonderful thing. Hindsight comes from seeing something in a fresh light, stepping out of role, being away from the co-embodied moment, hearing and then understanding another person's point of view. We often find ourselves good at seeing what others are getting caught up in as helpers. This is because we are not so involved and can see the key features of the interaction by being at a distance from it. Another person who is doing a different dance, to different music, can see and hear things in ways that we cannot see and hear them because we are too involved in to see.

Our challenge is to promote a more effective and self-conscious interaction in the helping relationship when we are in the thick of it. We can do this in supervision, or on reflection, by mapping out familiar patterns of help that goes wrong. This can aid our skills in spotting unhelpful interactions as they occur. It is useful to do this routinely and with as much spontaneity as possible without retreating behind professional roles. The skill is to practice the processes of reflection and shared supervision such that they become more like second nature. One way of helping this along is

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Speed Supervision (Potter 2012) using mapping tools and methods developed from Cognitive Analytic Therapy (Ryle and Kerr 2003)

"It takes two to Tango"

The introduction to the Helper's Dance list, notes that. "All of us have roles in our lives that involve helping people. Mostly our help is okay but there are many unhelpful dances that we, as helpers, can do despite our best intentions. If we can notice them as they happen we have a chance to change." We call them dances to capture the whole interaction between people of feelings, behaviour and thinking summed up by the adage: 'it takes two to tango'." The helping relationship is like a dance in the following ways:

- It is a joint activity involving doing things together which needs staging. When we agree to dance we need to notice, name and negotiate the dance, the setting and the context. Otherwise we may lose ourselves to the dance.

- It is an interaction which is both genuine and a performance: giving to the other a part of one's self whilst remaining in a role and keeping part of ourselves back.

- There are changes in who is leading and following, changes in direction, changes in the speed, type and intensity of the dance

- It is something over which we have potential choice, ownership and agency. I can change the dance.

- It is something we do alone, with one other or as part of a group

- It is something which can be made transparent, visible, transferable and may be exposing and inviting of a response from others

- It requires many competencies and skills that can be learnt but that cannot always be done well but can be more than worthwhile if we can get through the steps in an okay way

- A vital way of building a relationship comes from getting the dance wrong and noticing it and practicing together to get the dance right.

- It is like a dance in that it is to be judged by its performance in the moment it is experienced and not on how it should be on paper.

The helping relationship, like most dances has steps that should be followed or, which are missed or skipped over. Like any dance the lead in the helper's dance changes pace and direction, and even the nature of the dance can change. The flow, fluency and direction of the dance will be influenced by the diverse ways the participants of the dance hear the 'music'. As with dancing, we want to emphasise agency and joint activity, and this implies awareness of the skills, needs, context and possible choices involved in the helper's dance. No help can be sustained without a certain amount of spontaneity, interpersonal trust and predictability of interaction. Partners to the help need to have some idea of their roles but equally some capacity to be themselves. If we don't know our role or don't take time to work out and rehearse our role then we will tend to fall back automatically on

familiar and well-rehearsed positions. This checklist helps increase awareness in the helper and leads to a capacity and willingness to notice and reflect and change the dance if it is not helping.

Using the Checklist

When you use the checklist keep in mind the list of dances is a list of dialogue buttons. They are not set in stone. You can change the words and use it in different ways.   Any of us might get pulled into any one of the dances in certain circumstances. With each item it is important that you make the words yours. For personal or private reflection, you may think that your responses are somewhat different in comparison between home and work.

First just score your initial reactions quickly to all the items. Second go through it again and change or add words to help each item fit your experience if you need to. Third time around, compare your results by talking them through compassionately with a colleague or friend and discuss things you might try and do differently.   Not all the items will strike a chord with you. Many may once have been true but are no longer so.   Think back to earlier in your current role or career and how you might have scored yourself differently. Think about how you would like to contrast with any of the patterns.

The list is designed for reflective group work in paired or small group discussion and for team discussion of common and distinctive patterns that teams enact.   Look for clusters of patterns that seem to map on to each other. Usually one or two items will stand out and have a reference to one 'work role' or setting. It is also possible to focus on one client, or one professional role and think through how the relevant dance is being jointly constructed and how we can notice, name and negotiate several different steps to the dance or a different dance altogether. As a team exercise divide into professional groups, or mixed groups and give a score for the team for each item. Change the first-person pronoun to 'we and us' instead of 'I and me'.   This use of the dance list to aid discussion can be supplemented by mapping out the pattern as a group using the cognitive analytic mapping methods described elsewhere.

The Dancer's help list offers helpers and their clients, colleagues and teams an opportunity to reflect together on the interaction between more personal and individual motivations for helping and familiar ways of being pulled into a helping role or style. Such shared reflection can foster a more open culture of discussion and supervision combining personal and professional judgement. The helper's capacity to reflect and change is helped by having the various helper's dances in mind.   The summary description of the dances in the list have been evolved from a repeated process of use and revision involving several thousand people in a variety of helping professions.

Potter, S. (2012 March) Speed *Supervision*   AUCC Journal UK

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Potter, S. (2014)   Helper's Dance   *Cognitive Analytic Therapy for people with intellectual disabilities and their Carers.*   Lloyd. J, Clayton, P. (Ed) Jessica Kingsley   London

Ryle, A and Kerr, I.B. (2002) *Introducing Cognitive Analytic Therapy*   Wiley

Knox J (2011) *Self-Agency in Psychotherapy*   Norton London

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A list of typical interactions that can affect the helping relationship

All of us have roles in our lives that involve helping people. Mostly our help is okay but there are several unhelpful dances that we, as helpers with individuals or groups, can do despite our best intentions. If we can notice them as they happen we have a chance to change. This list adds up to common patterns we have come across in teaching empathy and people skills using Cognitive Analytic Therapy for nurses, doctors, teachers, psychologists, social workers, managers, people working creatively and many others. We call them dances to capture the whole interaction between people of feelings, behaviour and thinking summed up by the adage: 'it takes two to tango'. The list is not set in stone. First just score your reactions quickly to all the items. Second go through it again and change or add words to help each item fit your unique variety of experience. Not all the items will strike a chord with you. Add notes such as 'used to be true' or 'true when working at x'. Compare your results by talking them through compassionately with a colleague. Discuss things you might do differently. Keep in mind the rough and ready **One-Third** idea that one third of any dance is led by the person you are helping, one third is led by you and one third by the system, model or organisation in which you are embedded whilst helping.

1. **Never good enough:** I have high expectations of myself which makes me think my help won't be good enough, others will be disappointed, and I will cope by trying even harder

   This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

2. **When the person I am helping is too demanding:** I feel put upon and suffer in silence but won't complain for fear of upsetting them and causing trouble**.**

   This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

3. **Genuine and vulnerable or safe but less real**: either (a) I show feelings and feel genuine but somewhat vulnerable or (b) I safely hide feelings, appear professional but less the real me.

   This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Circle for a) underline for b))**

4. **Either it's my way or the wrong way:** If I think I am helping in the right way I can stick to it stubbornly and find it hard hearing it could be done another way.

   This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

5. **If at first, I don't succeed**: I will try and try again to help until I am defeated or successful.

   This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

6. **Lose perspective:** I get so involved in the detail I forget the big picture

   This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

7. **Let it be and wait and see:** When I am not sure what to do so I tend to do nothing and wait and see.

   This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

8. **Silenced or silencing**: Either a) I mostly listen quietly and find it hard to interrupt or b) I have lots to say and risk controlling the conversation too much.

   T**his could be me:**   not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(circle for a) underline for b))**

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9. **Tell me what to do**: I feel uncertain how to help so rely on reassurance and guidance

   This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

10. **Switch off:** When I am upset by the suffering of those whom I help I cope by switching off.

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

11. **Who's who?** If I help too many people in a day, my feelings and understanding of one person can get mixed up with my feelings and understanding for another

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

12. **Mostly a hero rarely a villain:**   When it is going well it is usually thanks to me but when it is not going well I tend to think it must be someone else's fault.

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

13. **Jump in or hold back**: either a) I am in at the deep end as a helper and tend to give my all or b) I am not so involved and hold back, miss the moment to help or watch on from the side-lines.

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Circle for a) underline for b)**

14. **My hands are tied:** With a freer hand I could be more helpful, but I must follow the rules**.**

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

15. **If I don't help no one will:** Other people won't see the need or have the knowhow to help so it is left up to me to provide the care that someone needs.

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

16. **Involved, busy and needed or at a loose end and bored:** If I am not busy helping people all the time I can be at a loss to know what to do with myself, feel bored and/or not needed so best to keep busy!

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

17. **Lack of resources frustrates me:** I know what needs doing and how to help but often the money, the treatment or support is not available, and I feel frustrated, angry or helpless.

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

18. **Looking after others means neglecting myself**: I put so much into looking after others that their needs take over and I forget to look after myself enough and am at risk of stress.

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

19. **Not here, not now:** I see the need to talk about what is happening between us but find it unpredictable or embarrassing and tend to wait and miss the moment to name it.

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

20. **Where were we?** I can get so involved in the relationship I forget the purpose for meeting

    This could be me: not at all   rarely   sometimes   often   always **(Please circle)**

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