

Me-time or you-time?

By Tania Coke

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Making time for other people can help them and you, says Tania Coke.



We hear a lot these days about the importance of me-time. I'm all for it. My idea of me-time would be going to bed with a good book and a cup of tea or sitting in a café and writing my diary. These little rituals help to clear my head, relax my body and soothe my soul.

It's like a re-set for the system, a boost to mind, body and soul.

Recently, it struck me that me-time isn't the only way to achieve these results. It happened when I was telling a work colleague about a conflict that was weighing on my mind. This colleague is an excellent listener. He didn't interrupt me, and he didn't try to bring the conversation back to himself.

He sat silent and attentive as I spoke, observing what I expressed and how. As he listened, I could feel my mind begin to clear and the tension in my shoulders dissolve. He had created me-time for me, acting as a sort of diary for me, a space in which I could express myself without censorship or interruption.

But here's the twist.

After I had finished speaking, he thanked me for sharing my thoughts, telling me that as he was listening, he felt his mind begin to clear and the tension in his own shoulders disappear. Not only had he created me-time for me, he had created 'you-time' for himself, with similar benefits for both of us!

How could this be? Thinking it over, I can see three possible explanations.

Catharsis

The first is catharsis. Witnessing the struggles of others can help us overcome our own because we see ourselves reflected in their lives. This is the social function of drama described by Aristotle and others.

According to some versions of the theory of catharsis, when we empathically observe the turmoil of others it serves to purge our own, releasing our emotions and soothing our souls. Other versions stress the intellectual benefits: catharsis brings intellectual clarity, helping us to re-order our thoughts and rid ourselves of mental confusion.

Either way, the benefits are remarkably close to the benefits of me-time.

Deep listening

The second possible explanation is that the state of mind required for deep listening is itself good for us. Through the act of listening with intense concentration to the experiences of others and absorbing ourselves in their world, we can achieve a state of 'flow.'

This is the state of mind achieved by immersing ourselves in a challenging task, which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines in his book 'Flow'. He claims that being in this state raises the quality of our lives, bringing happiness, growth and fulfilment. At the very least, by concentrating on the thoughts, feelings and needs of other people, we can gain temporary relief from our own worries.

Golden Rule

A third possible explanation relates to the Golden Rule. This is the principle, shared by the major world religions, of treating others as we would like others to treat us. And why might 'doing to others as we would be done by' benefit us?

It could be that obeying the Golden Rule has a positive effect on our hearts and minds simply because it is morally or spiritually good. Or maybe doing something good for others is good for us because human beings are innately connected, in the sense that my happiness is fundamentally tied to yours. Or more simply, seeing others happy makes me happy, full stop.

Whatever the explanation, that comment by my colleague made me realise that as well as me-time, I also need to ensure a healthy dose of you-time in my life. One obvious way to do this is through deeply listening to the stories and experiences of people around me, drawing on the listening skills I have learnt as a workplace mediator.

Through this kind of listening, I can help others to disentangle the confusion in their hearts and minds and thereby do the same for myself.

By devoting my attention to other people's lives, I can reconnect with them, and, paradoxically, with myself.