Asking for help is hard, but people want to help more than we realize, Stanford scholar says

We underestimate just how willing people want to assist others and how positive they feel about doing so.

Asking for help is hard, but others want to help more than we often give them credit for, says Stanford social psychologist **Xuan Zhao**.

We shy away from asking for help because we don't want to bother other people, assuming that our request will feel like an inconvenience to them. But oftentimes, the opposite is true: People want to make a difference in people's lives and they feel good – happy even – when they are able to help others, said Zhao.

Xuan Zhao
(Image credit: Anne Ryan)

Here, Zhao discusses the research about how asking for help can lead to meaningful experiences and strengthen relationships with others – friends as well as strangers.

Zhao is a research scientist at **Stanford SPARQ**, a research center in the Psychology Department that brings researchers and practitioners together to fight bias, reduce disparities, and drive culture change. Zhao's research focuses on helping people create better social interactions in person and online where they feel seen, heard, connected, and appreciated. Her research, recently **published** in *Psychological Science*, suggests that people regularly underestimate others' willingness to help.

This fall, Zhao will be co-teaching a two-session workshop ***Science-Based Practices for a Flourishing Life*** through Stanford's well-being program for employees, BeWell.

Why is asking for help hard? For someone who finds it difficult to ask for help, what would you like them to know?

There are several common reasons why people struggle to ask for help. Some people may fear that asking for help would make them appear incompetent, weak, or inferior – **recent research** from Stanford doctoral student Kayla Good finds that children as young as seven can hold this belief. Some people are concerned about being rejected, which can be embarrassing and painful. Others may be concerned about burdening and inconveniencing others – a topic I recently explored. These concerns may feel more relevant in some contexts than others, but they are all very relatable and very human.

The good news is those concerns are oftentimes exaggerated and mistaken.

What do people misunderstand about asking for help?

When people are in need of help, they are often caught up in their own concerns and worries and do not fully recognize the prosocial motivations of those around them who are ready to help. This can introduce a persistent difference between how help-seekers and potential helpers consider the same helping event. To test this idea, we conducted several experiments where people either directly interacted with each other to seek and offer help, or imagined or recalled such experiences in everyday life. We consistently observed that help-seekers underestimated how willing strangers – and even friends – would be to help them and how positive helpers would feel afterward, and overestimated how inconvenienced helpers would feel.

These patterns are consistent with **work** by Stanford psychologist **Dale Miller** showing that when thinking about what motivates other people, we tend to apply a more pessimistic, self-interested view about human nature. After all, Western societies tend to value independence, so asking others to go out of their way to do something for us may seem wrong or selfish and may impose a somewhat negative experience on the helper.

The truth is, most of us are deeply prosocial and want to make a positive difference in others' lives. **Work** by Stanford psychologist **Jamil Zaki** has shown that empathizing with and helping others in need seems to be an intuitive response, and **dozens of studies**, including my own, have found that people often feel happier after conducting acts of kindness. These findings extend **earlier research** by Stanford Professor **Frank Flynn** and colleagues suggesting that people tend to overestimate how likely their direct request for help would be rejected by others. Finally, other **research** has even shown that seeking advice can even boost how competent the help-seeker is seen by the advice-giver.

Why is asking for help particularly important?

We love stories about spontaneous help, and that may explain why random acts of kindness go viral on social media. But **in reality**, the majority of help occurs only after a request has been made. It's often not because people don't want to help and must be pressed to do so. Quite the opposite, people want to help, but they can't help if they don't know someone is suffering or struggling, or what the other person needs and how to help effectively, or whether it is their place to help – perhaps they want to respect others' privacy or agency. A direct request can remove those uncertainties, such that asking for help enables kindness and unlocks opportunities for positive social connections. It can also create emotional closeness when you realize someone trusts you enough to share their vulnerabilities, and by working together toward a shared goal.

It feels like some requests for help may be harder to ask than others. What does research say about different types of help, and how can we use those insights to help us figure out how we should ask for help?

Many factors can influence how difficult it may feel to ask for help. Our recent research has primarily focused on everyday scenarios where the other person is clearly able to help, and all you need is to show up and ask. In some other cases, the kind of help you need may require more specific skills or resources. As long as you make your request Specific, Meaningful, Action-oriented, Realistic, and Time-bound (also known as **the SMART criteria**), people will likely be happy to help and feel good after helping.

Of course, not all requests have to be specific. When we face mental health challenges, we may have difficulty articulating what kind of help we need. It is okay to reach out to **mental health resources** and take the time to figure things out together. They are there to help, and they are happy to help.

You mentioned how cultural norms can get in the way of people asking for help. What is one thing we can all do to rethink the role society plays in our lives?

Work on independent and interdependent cultures by **Hazel Markus**, faculty director of **Stanford SPARQ**, can shed much light on this issue. Following her insights, I think we can all benefit from having a little bit more interdependency in our micro- and macro-environments. For instance, instead of promoting "self-care" and implying that it is people's own responsibility to sort through their own struggles, perhaps our culture could emphasize the value of caring for each other and create more safe spaces to allow open discussions about our challenges and imperfections.

What inspired your research?

I have always been fascinated by social interaction – how we understand and misunderstand each other's minds, and how social psychology can help people create more positive and meaningful connections. That's why I have studied topics such as **giving compliments**, **discussing disagreement**, sharing personal failures, **creating inclusive conversations on social media**, and **translating social and positive psychology research as daily practices for the public**. This project is also motivated by that general passion.

But a more immediate trigger of this project is reading **scholarly work** suggesting that the reason why people underestimate their likelihood of getting help is because they don't recognize how uncomfortable and awkward it would be for someone to say "no" to their request. I agree that people underestimate their chance of getting help upon a direct ask, but based on my personal experience, I saw a different reason – when people ask me for help, I often feel genuinely motivated to help them, more than feeling social pressure and a wish to avoid saying no. This project is to voice my different interpretation on why people agree to help. And given that I've seen people who have struggled for too long until it was too late to ask for help, I hope my findings can offer them a bit more comfort when the next time they can really use a helping hand and are debating whether they should ask.

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