

Ep #194: Why We Give Advice (Even When It's Not Asked For)



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With Your Host

Maisie Hill

The Maisie Hill Experience with Maisie Hill

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This is episode 194. Today I'm going to be talking to you about the urge to give advice, and specifically unsolicited advice, which we've all done and we've all been on the receiving end, so let's get into it.

Alright folks, how are you doing? I've got a couple of exercises for you to kick this episode off with. So first of all, think of an occasion when someone offered you some unsolicited advice, okay? Think about a time that happened and I want you to recall how it felt to be on the receiving end of it. Did you accept it? Did you resist it?

Did you feel really connected to that person when they shared the unsolicited advice with you? Or did you actually get defensive and did it break the connection that you have with them? Did you feel loved when they offered it to you or did you feel judged?

Okay, so that's exercise number one. Exercise two, I want to flip things around. Think of an occasion where you offered someone some advice without them explicitly asking for it. Okay, and I do mean explicitly, as in they were talking about something that they were struggling with and you just went ahead and gave some advice, suggested something to them without them clearly and explicitly saying, what would you do in this situation? What would you recommend? So think about that time when you gave unsolicited advice.

Why did you do it? What was the feeling you were experiencing that led you to offer the advice? And what was going on in your mind? What were you thinking?

We all know what it's like to be on the receiving end of unsolicited advice. I'm yet to meet someone who loves to be told what to do, but we all also give it to some degree and some do it more than others. I will be very honest with you, recently I unintentionally stepped over this line. Even more horrifying, I was sat in my favourite cafe preparing this episode about unsolicited advice and as I went to pay, I got chatting to someone who was in the queue that I've chatted to a little bit before but I don't know that well

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and I just asked them what they were up to and they told me that they were working on editing a podcast episode and that it was quite a time-consuming process and frustrating for them because there were no shortcuts.

And what did I do? I just swept in with a suggestion and I left the cafe cringing because I was literally preparing this episode when I did it, and I haven't seen her to apologise, so if you're listening, I'm so sorry. But why did I do it? Okay, there's kind of a superficial level answer to this and then there's a deeper answer.

So the superficial one is, well you know, I love business software and tech stacks. They're one of my special interests, so I do love an opportunity to talk about them. But I could have done that without giving unsolicited advice. My brain also loves to figure out problems like this. I love a good old quandary. But again, I could have asked, is this something you'd like me to think about?

I might have some suggestions. Just give them the option to say yes or no, to just give consent to it. That's like the superficial answer.

The real answer of why I did this is because anytime we do this, we get to feel good, don't we? I got to feel good about myself for about 30 seconds until I realised what I'd done, and then I was just mortified. Plain old mortified. That urge to give advice can stem from a well-intentioned place, but it's still worth examining it.

It might come from wanting to solve problems, wanting to show that we care, but often it's about boosting our own ego in some way and we will feel that rush of satisfaction from sharing our expertise. It can also stem from a need to assert our superiority or, and this one's very common, it can come from the discomfort of our own emotions.

So rather than simply listening to someone and being present in the conversation without fixing things, we feel compelled to take action and do

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something by giving suggestions rather than be in our own experience of any discomfort that we're going through.

So, why is unsolicited advice so annoying? It's intrusive, right? When someone offers it, they're kind of intruding upon you, right? And kind of suggesting that you need their help, that you cannot figure it out on your own. And that person might have a need to prove themselves, like to prove to themselves or to other people that they would know what to do in your situation and that they'd be better able to handle things. With that knowledge that they have, the experience that they have, that makes them superior to you.

That supply of advice is just a constant way for them to position themselves as being better than the person who's on the receiving end of the advice. If you've had someone in your life who loves to give unsolicited advice, then it can sometimes feel like there's a weird competition going on that you didn't actually sign up for, but the other person, the advice giver, is determined to win, whether you like it or not.

That urge compels them to cross boundaries in order for them to have the upper hand. It's very weird. If you've ever been in this situation, it's a weird one to be in. And I think they just get a big boost of satisfaction in sharing their opinion and they just get that ego boost from it.

Thankfully, I don't have many people in my life who offer me advice. And I think that's one of the great things about being in the coaching world, having lots of friends who are coaches because coaches don't give advice. I think that's one of the biggest misconceptions out there about coaching is that we're here to give advice, and that is not the case at all.

Coaching is all about the coach asking really good questions to help someone access their own wisdom. I don't tell my clients what to do because I have no idea what's best for them. Instead, I just coach them so that they can come to their own conclusions, have their own realisations, make their own decisions about anything they are going to do or not do.

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Now, there are some occasions where I do say, well why don't you just do this? But that's not me saying you should do this. It's one way for me to get to the bottom of what's going on and to help them realise something powerful. Because often their answer is very telling and it gives us the information that we need in order to progress the conversation.

So it can be that, or it can be me helping them to see that there are other options available to them. Because there are times when we're so caught up in an issue, especially if we're under stress and feeling some stress around it, that it's just harder for us to access our thinking brain and come up with creative solutions.

But also, because there are options in terms of responses and paths that we can take, if you haven't had them modelled to you by others, you might not even realise that they're a possibility. So part of my job as a coach is to say, hey, did you know this was an option too? Just as a consideration, not to tell someone that's what they should do.

And in my membership we ask the members not to give advice in the community because there's so much advice thrown about online, right? There's just people giving advice left, right and centre without anyone even asking for it. And even when someone explicitly states I'm not actually looking for advice, I'm just sharing this so please don't offer any, still people cannot help themselves.

I see some of the comments sometimes, I'm like wow, they are completely ignoring that person's boundary. I don't want that in my community. That's not the purpose of the membership. I want the members to build trust in themselves, to make powerful decisions based on what they think, not what someone else thinks or does. We have that community rule in place to support that goal.

There are occasions where it is useful to receive suggestions, but those occasions are far fewer than we think. It's always best for someone to be explicit and ask for it rather than just going ahead. It also happens a lot in

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parenting groups, on any post about motherhood and parenting. I think more so about motherhood though.

You'll just see all these comments like, oh well have you tried this and we did this and it worked really well and blah, blah, blah. It's the best thing to do. There's so many areas where I see this happening online.

Unfortunately, a lot of people in alternative health do this. Well, you know, you just take this herb for that. And you know what would really help, blah, blah, blah.

And that's not to say that these suggestions aren't true, okay, but unless someone has specifically asked you, why the fuck are you offering that up, right? I know it can come from excitement about what you're learning, what you know, and I know it can be the desire to help others, but did anyone ask you? Even if they did, is it legally and ethically appropriate for you to answer, right?

I have a lot of people who ask me for health advice. Complete strangers that I've never communicated with at all will send me their entire medical history over a DM. That's not something I'm available for even when I was working as a practitioner and I no longer do. And don't get me wrong, I feel very honoured that they trust me with that, but they're not a client that I'm treating. Haven't treated people in years. They haven't signed a consent form.

I haven't taken their medical history. I haven't gone through a full consultation, so although I know a lot, I don't know about them, right? And that's the truth for any kind of online interaction about health.

But when we're talking about unsolicited advice among groups such as mums, parents, alternative health practitioners, it is important to consider the social context of that, okay? Especially for those who feel undervalued by society and are undervalued by society. So that goes for alternative practitioners, healthcare practitioners of most kinds, mothers, older people, women in general, etc.

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For many people in these groups, unsolicited advice is an outlet for asserting their value and expertise in a world that often overlooks or completely diminishes their contributions. So for people in professions or roles that society often undervalues, anything in the service industry or caring professions, the offer of advice might not just be about sharing knowledge, it's also about seeking validation.

Because when mainstream narratives fail to acknowledge your expertise or your societal roles fully, you might be more inclined to offer advice as a way for you to affirm your worth and assert your knowledge, and I've certainly done that early on in my career.

Also think about a stay-at-home mum who spends most of their time parenting, educating, nurturing, managing the complexities of a household, all the emotional labour, all the unpaid labour. It's a role with immense value, but completely underappreciated. If you're in that situation and then you're in a social setting, that urge to offer advice or share your experience can be a way of demonstrating your skills and your insights and effectively saying, hey, I've got valuable expertise too. So it's important to look at that social context as well.

We've also got the challenge of being a helper, right? When you've been socialised as female, there is a societal expectation to help and to be a caregiver. These roles often come with the pressure to constantly contribute positively, and that can lead to overstepping boundaries with unsolicited advice. It's just a way of reinforcing our social value and demonstrating that we are in fact knowledgeable, that we are helpful and they're the qualities that are expected of us in terms of how we are raised and socialised.

I've actually had occasions where I haven't jumped in with advice because of all this awareness and because I hadn't been asked to. I thought, you know what, I'm not going to jump in with the advice. I've actually been told that I'm cold and unhelpful. No, that is not it at all. You're just asking me to do the work of figuring out what you want and figure out what's best for you

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and I'm no longer willing to do that for you. Okay, if you want my help, ask for it. I'll consider what I'm available to do. You might get a no, might get some suggestions, but you have to ask for it.

And a lot of the time when this comes up on coaching calls, it is around motherhood and how older family members get involved. Older adults often find themselves marginalized as well because society prizes youth, and the giving of advice is not just a habit, but a way to try and remain relevant and respected. Often backfires, it doesn't usually work out that way. But I think at its core, it's a demonstration of wisdom and experience that's trying to come forth. But as I said, I rarely hear of that working out well. It usually doesn't go down well, because when we jump in with advice, we're making the assumption that someone doesn't have the ability to figure things out and determine what's best for themselves. And it can come across as condescending, meddling, nosy, intrusive, the list goes on. And occasionally there can also be a perceived arrogance to it as well, of like, I know what's right.

Again, this is totally different to if someone is asking you for advice and you're having a really connected, super supportive conversation. When someone inserts their opinions where they aren't wanted and then the person doesn't follow their advice, what happens? I'm sure you've been in this scenario yourself, okay? I'm sure you've seen it play out somewhere in your own life. They take umbrage when their advice isn't followed. They get offended and upset that you're not doing what they suggested, even though you never asked for their opinion in the first place, and this just destroys relationships. But there's this narrative that they're only trying to help, and you know, they've been very generous in doing so, and if you don't receive those suggestions and follow that advice in that way, then that means that you're ungrateful.

And then lo and behold, now there's resentment and frustration coming into the mix. And they can even revel in your failures. Well, I told them that would happen if they didn't do what I suggested or it's their own fault. They

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brought it on themselves. They made a rod for their own back. If only they'd done what I told them to do.

But if you truly gave that advice as a gift to that person, would you expect something in return, like their thanks and gratitude, and that they're going to follow your advice. That's very conditional. That's definitely not unconditional love. That's conditional. That's not a gift. You're literally just expecting them to follow some kind of instruction manual. It's just never going to happen. If you're giving advice wanting this, then you're just going to experience so much disappointment and frustration.

Another place this shows up is in codependent relationships.

Codependency involves an excessive emotional or psychological reliance on a partner, on someone else. It doesn't have to be a romantic partner, it could be a parent, there's all sorts of relationships this can emerge in. It's typically one where one person or both people feel an overwhelming need to be needed by the other and that need can manifest as the frequent offering of unsolicited advice which is driven by the desire to be seen as indispensable to the other person's well-being.

So this is about the need to fix and control and in codependent relationships, one person might feel an intense obligation to solve the other person's problems. Offering unsolicited advice becomes a method of controlling the situation and by extension, the other person. Then the advice giver in the codependent dynamic might believe consciously or subconsciously that their partner cannot manage without their input, which just reinforces this cycle of dependency.

So imagine a scenario where one partner or parent or friend constantly tells the other how to handle work conflicts, how to manage friendships, their dating life, making all sorts of personal decisions without ever being asked for that help, for that advice. In this scenario, the unsolicited advice isn't about sharing expertise. It's about asserting a role in the partner's decision-making process, often under the guise of being helpful. Is it helpful though? That's what we have to question. Usually it's not.

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At the heart of many codependent relationships, there's a fear of abandonment. Offering that unsolicited advice is a strategy to make someone feel more secure in a relationship by becoming overly involved in the other person's life. But that over-involvement is often justified. I'm just taking care of them, I'm just helping them, but it's actually really stifling the other person's ability to act independently. It leads to a lot of resentment, a lot of breakdown in relationships.

I think that's the case whether it's codependency or not, that is the case for unsolicited advice just across the board. I really recommend, here's my unsolicited advice to you all. The irony, I know. But if you can think about giving unsolicited advice as an inability to sit with the urge to do so, okay? The urge to give advice. It's the inability to just keep your mouth shut and sit on your hands, right?

I coach people on this a lot, usually in relation to family members. Part of what I help my clients to realise is that the behaviour of offering advice comes from someone's inability to sit with emotions that are uncomfortable to them, and they don't know what to do with them. Instead of being with their own emotions and understanding them and figuring that out, they have to do something. They have to give advice as a way of managing their own anxieties and fears, which they might not even be aware of, okay?

And rightly or wrongly, they're worried about you. They have fears. That's challenging for them to sit with. As I said, they might be utterly clueless that that's what's going on and it's actually about them and their fears, right? But they try to manage that discomfort by doing something and that's by giving advice.

And I like to remind my clients that this can actually come from love as well. Helpful to remember that when we're busy calling them all the names under the sun, right? They might lack self-awareness and understanding, but it could still come from love.

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And remember that this goes for us as well, right? Sometimes we're the person being given unsolicited advice, sometimes we're the ones doing the thing that we cannot stand. You don't need to berate yourself for that, just get curious about it and see if you can sit with your urge next time you feel the urge to give unsolicited advice.

Just keep your trap shut, just listen and love on the other person because when someone shares something that they're struggling with, it's a bid for connection. They want to connect with you. They might, might then want some help, but it will go down far better if you wait for them to explicitly ask you for advice or you could just ask them what would be helpful to you right now and instead of taking over just let them lead the way. They know what's best for themselves.

All right my loves, have a fabulous week and I will catch you next time.

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