

6

THE NATURE OF EFFECTIVE HELPING

EMPATHY AND SYMPATHY VERSUS PITY

*Carol M. Davis, DPT, EdD, MS, FAPTA and
Gina Maria Musolino, PT, MSED, EdD*

“It is one of the beautiful compensations in this life that no one can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.” –Ralph Waldo Emerson

OBJECTIVES

- To describe the ideal overall aim of helping.
- To explore the behaviors that interfere with effective helping.
- To distinguish among sympathy, pity, identification, self-transposal, and empathy.
- To describe the characteristics of helping communication.
- To reveal the characteristics of effective helpers.

When someone needs help, no matter what the nature of the help needed, we can assume that something's not right and that something is interfering with day-to-day function and growth. Those of us in the healing professions have devoted our lives, for the most part, to helping those who need help in understanding and overcoming illness or disability. However, some of us are more concerned with working with people who are essentially well but need help in becoming more fit or preventing illness or injury. Whatever the problem, health care professionals (HCPs) have devoted their professional lives to helping people overcome whatever is blocking them from living functionally useful and productive lives. Let's start by examining a case scenario:

Ariel, the supervisor in occupational therapy, was also the clinical instructor (field work coordinator/instructor) for Erin, a student in her last clinical before graduating. For the most part, Erin was independent in her patient care, but occasionally she would ask for Ariel's help in solving a clinical problem. At the end of one day, Erin asked Ariel for the answer to a question that Ariel felt Erin should know by now. She was tempted to tell her, “Go look that up! You should know the answer to that by now.” But it was late in the day, and both of them were tired. Ariel gave in and told her the answer to her question, but then gave her a dirty look, as if to let her know she was not happy to be asked that question. Erin was confused about why she seemed unhappy.