

Advice From the Trenches: Self-Help Hell

Dear C and Dr. B:

I am 20 years old and I've read a lot of self-help books. You would think that I would know now how to act, how to be happy, and how to make better decisions, but instead it all just gets muddled in my head. A lot of these books contradict each other, and the advice just doesn't work out the way it does for the people who wrote the books. I still feel directionless and I am at a loss on what to do next.

Dr. B says:

Common sense is a hard thing to teach; it requires a lot of trial and error. Books can help, but I am not sure it can come solely from a book. The problem with many self-help books is that they push a very one-sided agenda. They tout ideas like "live every day like this is the last day of your life." Unless it actually is the last day of your life, that is really bad advice. The last day of the average person's life, they wouldn't go to work or school. They would probably want to surround themselves with friends and family. Unless you are rich, you need a lot of other skills.

"All you need is love," is also stupid. If love isn't balanced with duty, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity, love will become painful fast. As with diets there are millions of means to an end. The particular one you choose doesn't really matter so long as it's balanced and you are consistent over the long haul.

Here's a few short cuts tips I like:

- Do not agree to things you don't agree with. Pay attention to what you are agreeing to.
- Wait three seconds before you react and take a deep breath before you speak.
- If you are mothering someone you can't sleep with them, that is incest.
- Humans learn through role modeling. Your children will do what you do, not what you say, so before you do something, ask yourself if you would want your daughter to do the same. If the answer is no then don't do it, even if you don't have kids.
- Imagine yourself 20 years from now, successful and doing what you want to be doing. No one has a greater investment in your decisions and life now than that Future You - if you don't do what it takes to get there, that Future You will never be. Ask that future self for perspective: How does the Future You feel about the person you are currently dating? If that relationship doesn't support the Future You, then it may never happen.

There is one self-help book I do recommend: *Generation WTF*. It examines 20 years of self-help books and brings together their commonalities. It turns out that creating a life is very similar to creating a nonprofit business - in a relationship, both parties have to reinvest back into the partnership. If either party is taking but not giving back, the relationship, like a business with someone siphoning off the profits, will fail.

C says:

Good tips, Dr. B - although I don't think the 20 year into the future exercise is going to be much motivation for seniors. We really don't want to imagine where we will be in 20 years.

The problem that lies not only with self-help books but with therapy advice in general is that the person who is taking it all in has an automatic screening device that surrounds their brain. They will read, or hear, whatever it is that their current level of understanding allows them to. If you tell someone who is naturally self-indulgent, "do not agree to things you don't agree with," they will likely just use it as an excuse to blow off anything that is remotely unpleasant for them and justify it with "my therapist told me to!"

We all see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear. That is probably why despite the sheer number of people in this country who are buying self-help books and going to therapists, we still OD on opioids, buy guns and shoot up schools and fight each other over health mandates that could be saving lives. Our culture breeds it.

Honestly? If you need assistance, it might be better to go with the self-help books or sign up for a yoga/meditation class than to make an appointment with your doctor. At least your author/instructor won't put you on psychiatric drugs. It is my opinion that antidepressants, anti-anxiety meds and Adderall are the most dangerous gateway drugs out there, in large part because people will abuse the hell out of them and then say, "my therapist told me to!" The fact that it is medically sanctioned just gives people more of an excuse to turn their brains off and go on automatic, which generally translates to: STAY COMFORTABLE AT ALL COSTS.

Better yet, ask us! No BS, no insurance necessary.

- Cathren Housley

You can visit Dr. B's blog at drbrilliantcliche.wordpress.com