

Advice on Giving Advice to the Advice-Averse

PJAdvice columnist Belladonna Rogers on getting through to loved ones who don't want your — or anyone's — advice.
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Dear Belladonna Rogers,

I'm a 66-year-old divorced man in a great relationship with a 47-year-old divorced woman. We don't live together full time, but I adore her. My two grown children are very fond of her, too. Based on my personal and business experience, I can see that some of her decisions are unwise, particularly when it comes to her finances.

I'm positive that anything I say to address this aspect of her life will be unwelcome. She's a brilliant woman, very headstrong, and has been living on her own for much of her adult life.

Completely apart from our age difference, our life experiences are very different. I know that I could give her excellent guidance, but I fear that in doing so, I'd be on my way to unraveling our relationship. By the same token, it's very difficult to stand idly by and watch her make unwise decisions and say nothing. I feel my own impatience rising within me — I'm not getting any younger — but this is one boat I'm afraid of rocking.

What should I do?

Smitten in Smithville, Texas

Dear Smitten,

You raise one of the most profound questions in human life: how does one help and guide another person who resists help and guidance?

Your question also highlights the fact that some people, regardless of age, are advice-averse, while others are advice-friendly.

You make it clear that the woman in your life, "Jane," is advice-averse. Those who are hostile to even the best-intentioned advice can nevertheless be advised, but he or she has to raise the issue first, and the counsel must be carefully couched in subtle, non-threatening questions rather than firmly delivered as advice.

As you've written, on the one hand we often believe — and often correctly — that our wisdom and experience can be helpful in preventing unwise or even dangerous consequences. At the same time, if the other person is also an adult, we understand that any advice could well be rebuffed, and could cause anything from a frisson of annoyance to a complete break in a relationship.

And *frissons* are nothing trivial. They're comparable to the fault lines underlying the surface of the Earth: they may have no discernible effects for a very long time, but they do have the continuing potential to produce "the big one" — a rupture of major proportions, turning a seemingly firm structure into a heap of rubble.

It's one of the most difficult aspects of being in a loving relationship with an advice-averse person: remaining silent unless and until asked.

At best, unsought advice can fall on deaf ears, leading to the equivalent of what would have happened had one said nothing. Many advice-averse people take this to be their personal anthem:

At worst, unsought advice can provoke a rebellious response, causing an outcome exactly the opposite of what the adviser sought to bring about.

ADVISING THE ADVICE-AVERSE: WALKING ON EGGSHELLS

I suggest that you wait, silently and patiently, until "Jane" mentions the topic of her finances. I recommend against raising it yourself. Since you're already aware that she's having such problems, it's likely that one of these days she'll say something like, "I'm really in trouble at the moment, because I'd like to do something that I just can't afford."

When she herself raises the subject, don't interpret it an open invitation to present Jane with a list of your wise and helpful suggestions of what she should do immediately.

The approach I suggest places less emphasis on the words I'll offer below than on a method of interacting with an advice-averse person. Such people can be mighty prickly, and will invariably interpret advice as disapproval. Your approach must take that into account.

Try to be as gentle as possible and also as detached and noncommittal as you can. Jane – like any advice-averse person — will be hypersensitive to the slightest implication that you view her situation as a flaw or as a failing of hers.

It's essential to present your thoughts in such a way as to minimize the likelihood that she'll feel hurt and angry, which will be her default responses. You'll be walking on eggshells, but will have to appear to be shooting the breeze. Your role model for this exchange is a teddy bear, not a Marine drill sergeant.

I never said this would be easy. It isn't.

When Jane does mention the problem, ask subtle, carefully planned questions. Your purpose is to encourage her to think along the lines you believe will help open her eyes to why she's in the fiscally unsound situation in which she finds herself.

You'll feel like saying, "Jane, here's what you should do *now*" and then telling her what she should do ASAP.

That may be what you'd like to say, but it's also guaranteed to arouse Jane's anger because she'll perceive you as controlling and trying to intrude on her personal prerogatives.

An indirect approach is often more effective with an advice-averse person. Such people receive all advice as negative criticism and they bridle at it like an unbroken horse with its first saddle and rider.

NON-JUDGMENTAL IS THE WAY TO GO

If you were to say something as vague and as non-judgmental as, "Do you have the impression that there could be a difference between what you spend on essentials and non-essentials and what you earn?" Jane might say, "I don't know. I guess I could add them up and see."

You may be sorely tempted to say, "OK, let's do that right now," but I'd recommend saying nothing and just nodding, as difficult as it might be for you. That may be as far as you'll get that day.

It's possible that she may do the math when you're not around. What you will have done is plant in her mind the concept of three categories that she has to look at: income, necessities, and luxuries.

Before you asked your seemingly casual question, she might not even have thought in those three categories at all.

One day — two or three weeks later, or even months later — she might raise the subject again, saying, "You know, I crunched some numbers and saw that if I curbed my enthusiasm for kitchen gear I don't really need, I could save \$500 a month."

To which you could say, "That would be great. That way, after a year, you'd have saved more than \$6,000 and at that point you could look at used cars. You've been talking about wanting a car as long as I've known you and you just figured out how you could manage it."

What you would have preferred to tell her in one minute may end up taking three weeks or even three months for Jane to realize on her own. However, if she does, she will — to use one of my least favorite current expressions — "own" the idea and feel that it evolved gradually through her own thinking and not because she was told what to do.

You will not have superimposed your views on an unwilling subject. Instead, you will have patiently, slowly, moved her — millimeter by millimeter — closer to your way of thinking.

If only you could have said it in two sentences, three months earlier, you could have achieved the same result instantly.

But with the advice-averse, that isn't possible. They're allergic to even the most sage advice available — yours.

THE FRUSTRATION OF DEALING WITH THE ADVICE-AVERSE

It's an often frustrating position in which older people find themselves: they feel they have the requisite experience and wisdom to offer useful suggestions, but they know that offering them will be counter-productive. Advice-averse younger people have a need to believe that the ideas were theirs and that through a process of personal evolution they've arrived at solutions that are right for them without outside help.

Although this dilatory method may seem like an inefficient use of *your* time, sitting down with Jane and saying, "Look, this is how it is, and this is how things work" isn't, alas, effective. It's hopeless.

Even if Jane asks you, "Are you telling me that if I spent less on extras and stuck only with necessities, I'd be happier in the long run?" I wouldn't fall into what is, whether consciously or not, a trap.

Just say, "It's something you might want to think about" in a neutral, calm way. And then say nothing more. If she's persistent, she might ask, "Well, is that what *you'd* do?" I'd still be as non-directive as possible. "I've known a lot of people who've done it that way and have found it helpful" is about as far as I'd suggest going.

Your goal is to keep your strong — and doubtless correct — analysis and advice out of the potential line of fire. Especially since you described Jane as "headstrong," I'd limit myself to gently-posed

questions that are intended to bring Jane around to your perspective without saying, “*Here’s the best way of dealing with a situation like this*” — even though it *is*.

Close friends of mine have gotten into painful — and worse, hurtful — conversations with those younger than themselves who cannot accept the older friends’ or relatives’ advice. They might as well be shouting into the winds of a thunderstorm. Their words haven’t gotten through to their younger loved ones, and have, sadly, only caused resentment and anger.

This aggravating inter-generational tug-of-war could not be more painful for all concerned. The younger adults feel they’re not being taken seriously and aren’t being treated as full-fledged adults. To them, the advice feels like criticism as if they were children. On the other hand, their older friends and family feel like helpless Cassandras, clearly foreseeing all manner of unfortunate and entirely predictable mishaps, but unable to make their forecasts even heard, or, if heard, persuasive.

That’s life.

THE BIG PICTURE

The larger question for you is this: if you see no change in Jane’s management of her finances, can you foresee that her attitude toward money and financial planning could ultimately cause you to be so uncomfortable that you become less enamored of her?

Your response to that question, in turn, may depend on whether you envision joining your lives in marriage. It would certainly be a more serious problem in a marriage with a wife potentially sharing your resources than in a loving but non-married relationship in which your finances are not pooled.

If you do see marriage with Jane in your future, and if you’re a man of means, you’ll want to consider an estate plan to protect your grown children from the familiar scenario of the step-parent spending the entire inheritance, leaving the spouse’s children by a previous marriage with nothing.

Enjoy the pleasures of having such a brilliant and lively woman in your life, but try not to insist that she see things your way immediately. The tortoise did win the race, but not by bounding ahead forcefully like the hare but by being slow and steady.

Try the approach of the tortoise. It can be painfully slow but it’s most likely to help you arrive where you’d most like to be with Jane — with her finances heading in the right direction and your relationship intact.