

# When Words Fail: How to ask for help at work

You've probably heard it millions of times, '*Just ask for help.*' How do you do that when you don't know what help you need, or, when you don't know what to say or how to say it?

You are not alone. Asking for help takes courage and practice. Once you get into the habit, your work productivity as well as your emotional health will improve.

Asking for help at work can be daunting and unfamiliar for some people. People resist asking for help mainly due to fear of rejection. Asking for help also requires a good level of self-esteem, a belief that you are worthy of help, and trust that help will come to you should you ask for it.

## Rejection

Psychologist [Guy Winch](#) explains that rejection hurts so much because it causes our brains to light up in the same way as when we are physically hurt. It is believed that hunter-gatherers would die if they were rejected from the tribe and we have that wired into our brains. That is why it can be so hard to reach out to others—because the fear of rejection is very powerful.

You may also have critical beliefs about yourself that tell you that asking for help is a sign of weakness or that you should not have to ask. You may not even be aware that you speak to yourself in this way, or that you talk yourself out of reaching out for support in the work environment. In addition, those living with depression or anxiety may feel anxious or doubtful that their needs can be met.

Feelings you might experience include:

- Embarrassment—feeling awkward asking for help
- Frustration—angry that you need help
- Sadness—feeling unable to ask for help
- Shame—feeling unworthy of help
- Guilt—feeling like you are doing something wrong
- Anxious—fear of asking for help
- Numb—you avoid asking for help completely

Disadvantages of not asking for help:

- Feeling overwhelmed from workload or responsibilities
- Burnout from not delegating
- Low self-esteem due to reinforcing the belief that you have to do it yourself
- Isolation and lack of connection to co-workers
- Frustration with yourself and others
- Internal suffering and conflicting emotions
- Lack of trust between you and co-workers

Benefits of asking for help:

- ♦ Foster a connection to others
- ♦ Builds resilience
- ♦ Increases productivity
- ♦ Encourages others to ask for help too
- ♦ Increases gratitude
- ♦ Brings clarity to communication
- ♦ Demonstrates maturity

## What to consider when asking for help

**Honesty.** Be honest with yourself about what support you need. Keep track if you put off asking for help—whether it's a question on a project or how to ask for a pay raise. Then, be honest with the person you have asked; honesty is a strength.

**Humility.** Humility is not the same as humiliation. Humility means you believe you are no better or worse than anyone. Remembering your humility can often help with challenging tasks, as you know that everyone goes through this—not just you.

**Communication.** Be clear and precise with the help you want and keep clarifying how you are feeling. Remember, do not assume members of your team know what you want or need as assumptions can lead to misunderstandings and mistakes.

**Trust** in yourself and others that you can ask for what you need and that someone will be able to help and support you. Trust that you deserve to be supported.

**Practice.** It takes time and effort to get comfortable with asking your manager and co-workers for help. You can begin practicing by asking for help once a day, start by asking to be shown a new skill, or ask a question if one comes up in a work meeting. If you feel like your workload is getting to be too much, or you need to take a step back, practice saying this. You could start by using this phrase, "Hi Bob, when you have a minute today, I could really use your help with something."

**Patience.** Take time for yourself and others. You and your team have busy schedules and you may not get a response right away, so give time and space for co-workers or your manager to respond to you.

**Acceptance.** Not everyone will be able to help you when you need it. Don't lose hope or let it deter you from getting your needs met. Rejection is part of life and will build up your resilience.

**Imperfection.** Embrace your humanity and accept that sometimes there are no right or wrong words to say. Try your best and be open with your vulnerability; that is what connects humans.

## Other ways of communicating when not in person

**Email.** If you don't feel able to have a face-to-face conversation, write an email to your manager explaining what it is you need and letting them know you would be willing to talk about it on a call if appropriate. Emails are also time-efficient so they may be a time saver. Emails also give you time to think about what it is you want to say, and reflect on your response.

**Video call.** A familiar way of communicating during the pandemic, people are now more accustomed to this way of interacting.

**Pick up the phone.** If there is something important that you need to communicate to your manager—such as bereavement, sickness, or a personal struggle—it might be easier to pick up the phone to communicate the news.

Remember, asking for help takes practice and time, but the rewards for reaching out to your team and manager will benefit the whole team as you set a standard for open and honest communication.

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Reviewed May 2021

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