



Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Pey-shuh ns: Who We Are Or What We Do?

By: Dave Hingsburger

So can you read the title? Given what it says, it's perhaps best you didn't angrily respond, "What the heck (or some other such word) is that supposed to mean?" You know when you look it the dictionary for a word, they show you how to pronounce it by spelling it in the way it should be said, showing emphasis with bold and something else, that is lost to me, with italics. The word in the title is supposed to be 'patience.'

This word has a really peculiar relationship for those of us who work with people who have intellectual disabilities. Whenever we tell someone what we do for a living they almost always say, 'You must have so much **pey-shuh ns.**' That's the assumption, isn't it? That people with disabilities need an exceptional amount of patience. I think, in our hearts, many of us believe that to be true as well.

And perhaps it is.

Over the last several months, whenever I did an abuse prevention class for people with intellectual disabilities, I have asked them a question: What kind of qualities do you want in a staff?

The answers have been interesting. Most of them mention positive qualities like kindness and warmth, almost all of those asked say that want people who are 'nice.' When they speak about negative qualities they mostly mention what staff shouldn't do, how staff shouldn't behave. Take a look at some of the things that have been said:

They shouldn't get mad so easy.

My staff gets pissed off at me all the time, she shouldn't do that, she needs to chill out.

I don't like it when I'm trying to do something and they rush me.

They shouldn't tell me that it's wrong to get mad sometimes.

They shouldn't speak to me like I'm a child when I disagree when them.



Hands

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It's an interesting list and for me the question is, are they asking for patience? Maybe the best place to go is to a dictionary. Here are three things that show up when 'patience' or, 'pey-shuh ns' is put into a computer search engine:

Noun

- 1. The quality of being patient, the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain, without complaint, loss of temper, irritation, or the like.*
- 2. An ability or willingness to suppress restlessness or annoyance when confronted with delay: to have patience with a slow learner.*
- 3. Quiet, steady perseverance; even-tempered care; diligence: to work with patience*

What becomes clear from this definition is that patience, with which the public thinks we have an exceptional capacity to be, is not what many people think it is. Patience is presented as kind of a passive skill, an ability to be relaxed and laid back, a 'hey dude, you want a beer' approach to life. But when looking at the definition it means something much different.

Patience is an action. It's not one that can be seen, but it's an action. "An ability or willingness to suppress restlessness or annoyance ..." That, is a very, very, big deal. That takes an awful lot of work. When you look at the list of behaviours that people with disabilities don't want us to engage in ... it's clear, isn't it. They want more of that 'suppression of annoyance' stuff.

Some of us find this easier than others. Some of us have a really high bar for irritation, and for them patience is easy because their buttons are placed almost out of reach of everyday interactions. Others of us, and I fall into this category, have a low bar for irritation and our buttons are clearly marked, well within reach, and can't be missed given they are painted a bright florescent red. For us, patience takes work and, like anything else worthwhile, practice.

We're going to look at the three parts of the definition that the dictionary gives for patience. Though they look and sound similar, there are some differences that should be highlighted. Then we'll reflect on what that means for those of us who provide service to people with intellectual disabilities.

- 1) The quality of being patient, the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain, without complaint, loss of temper, irritation, or the like.

This definition looks at a patient person, or a person using patience as a strategy, as being able to 'bear' provocation and annoyance and the like. This means, in plain talk, you can put up with stuff with which you would rather not put up with. It's the capacity to handle provocation and annoyance. It sometimes helps to realize that we serve people who have intellectual disabilities, and then realize what that means. People with intellectual disabilities are more likely to have been hurt in some serious way by others, often others who were in positions of trust. When we step into a relationship with people with disabilities, we are stepping into a long history of being at the blunt end of someone's service. There is a powerlessness that comes with service provision. For many the only way to assert power is through, often very problematic, behaviours.

It's not often mentioned in our training and orientation to the work we do with people with disabilities that our first, and most important, job is to establish ourselves as a trust worthy person.

How do we do that? Well, the answer comes in the second part of the definition ... "without complaint, loss of temper, irritation ...". Our patient response, may look like a lack of response. Lack of complaint. Lack of temper. Lack of irritation. But in fact our response is a very active response ... the quality of being patient, the bearing of acts of provocation and annoyance. This is something that we do, not something that we endure. It demonstrates that the typical triggers for anger, aggression and misuse of power will not be used – I will show you that I respect your journey, respect where you are now, respect your need to test me by simply being here, without resorting to anger or irritation, without resorting to a misuse of power.

You may be thinking that some behaviour plans require some kind of intervention in regard to some of these behaviours. Isn't that a prescription for lack of patience? Well, no. Behaviour plans may call for a specific intervention, but we all know that interventions can be done with a sense of calm and they can be done with a sense of retribution. This definition states that we always respond, with patience, even when providing guidance or support. No one controls the strength of my grasp but me.

- 2.) An ability or willingness to suppress restlessness or annoyance when confronted with delay: to have patience with a slow learner.

This is interesting isn't it? Right in the definition they give the example of working with someone who has difficulty with learning. This one doesn't talk about 'bearing' anything. This one talks about actively suppressing our natural inclination to impatience, to restlessness and annoyance. In the last definition, patience was seen as a response to provocation, and the quality of patience was defined by the ability to 'bear ... without ...'. Here is something quite different.

We know that we work with people who have intellectual disabilities and that this particular disability affects an individual's ability to learn and take in new information. It takes longer for learning to happen; there are more errors along the way. That's simply a part of what it is to have an intellectual disability. And ... we know that going in. I've never understood it when I hear a staff say, often with some anger and frustration, "I've shown her a hundred times and she still doesn't get it." OK. Why the anger? It's like getting angry at someone in a wheelchair who comes to the same curb for the 100th time and still can't get over it. Yelling isn't going to make that any easier.

I liked this definition a lot because, without saying it, the action of suppressing restlessness and annoyance, the action of being patient, creates a safe place for someone, and often someone with a chequered history with learning, to attempt to learn, to attempt to develop a new skill, to aim for success but to risk failure. This is an astonishing act of trust. No one is willing to try to learn anything when someone is watching over them, looking at their watch and demonstrating irritation that it's taking to long.

There are lots of ways to call people stupid; most of them don't involve saying a word.

3) Quiet, steady perseverance; even-tempered care; diligence: to work with patience.

Forgive me for saying this but ain't that lovely? If that's how someone described my work with them, I'd be so flattered. Notice that this definition doesn't imply that the person doesn't have goals, or doesn't want to achieve, or doesn't want to work towards those goals. No, it implies that the quality of how we work towards those goals shows patience as an on-going set of behaviours, not a static personality trait. Patience is an act we do, not a thing we are. So when those strangers say things like, "You must be so patient," an answer might be, "No, but I'm called to do patience all the time."

Several years ago I met a woman who, after listening to a talk on dealing with problem behaviours, said to me, "The greatest tool I have is patience." At the time I admit to shuddering at the use of that word. I didn't like hearing it so often from people when they heard what I did for a living. I thought it a way of saying 'You have to be special to work with those people and since I'm not special, keep them away from me.' But this woman was talking about patience as a tool, not as a quality embedded in 'we the angels who descend amongst the disabled to dispense with gifts of loving kindness' – blech.

So I listen and she told me a story of working with an angry young woman. "I knew she was trying to make me mad, I knew she was trying to get me to snap. But I could tell from looking in her eyes that she was waiting to find someone who would stay, who wouldn't throw their hands up in frustration and walk away. I was determined to be that person. So, I showed her nothing but patience and kindness. In a month or two she started to be angry less and treat me with curiosity. I had noticed that she was interested in watching one of the other women who lived in the house do her nails. It seemed to fascinate her. I asked her if she wanted to learn. She shyly said that she did. There were a couple of huge accidents with the polish but I taught her to laugh at the problems. She kept waiting for me to get mad at her, to be irritated at how slow the process was. I thought, at the time, it was the biggest test of my life. Someone who wasn't used to trusting was daring to trust me, was daring to try something new. I felt honoured. To this day we have a strong bond." Patience is a tool. It's a hard tool you use because you have speed up compassion and slow down irritation. You have to control your words and free your heart.

Summary

Maybe all those people who tell us we are patient are partially right. When we do our job well, we practice patience. Think of the last time you were in a food court at a mall, you can see the difference between parents who are practicing patience and parents who are not. One group is a lot louder than the other. One group has given up suppressing irritation and the other looks so tired because the act of staying in control takes a lot of effort and a lot of strength.

Pey-shuh ns is something you do.

And here's the kicker, the more you do it the easier it becomes. The more you practice it the greater quality of relationships you have at work, at home and in the world.

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