


Helping People Help Themselves

A Review of

Person to Person: Positive Relationships Don't Just Happen

Sharon L. Hanna

Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1991. 420 pp. ISBN 0-13-445818-4. \$37.60 paperback

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Reviewed by

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We live in an age that encourages self-improvement. Bookstore shelves are stacked with paperbacks promising happiness to those who understand themselves and other people. Articles in magazines and newspapers tout the benefits of self-exploration with such titles as "Find True Happiness by Becoming the Real You," "Use Self-Analysis to Unleash Your Creative Energies," and "Be the Blissful Person You Really Are." And through the miracles of television, radio, and cassette tapes, experts encourage us to find inner peace by losing weight, gaining weight, exercising, relaxing, controlling our emotions, letting go of our emotions, and so on. The message is clear: Why be satisfied with who you are when you can improve yourself by heeding experts' advice?

These self-improvement strategies are a doubled-edged sword, however. On the positive side, they may help people. Self-help books, for example, may facilitate treatment gains when used in conjunction with ongoing treatment ([Halliday, 1991](#)). Indeed, when [Starker \(1988\)](#) surveyed practicing clinicians about their opinions of self-help books he found that 97.7 percent of them recommended a self-help book to a client at one time or another. Critics point to the problems of self-help books: They proffer simplistic solutions to complex problems, their recommendations are often at variance with current research findings, they raise expectations but not awareness, and they inhibit people who might otherwise benefit from therapy from seeking it ([Rosen, 1987](#)).

Sharon L. Hanna's *Person to Person: Positive Relationships Don't Just Happen* is on the edge of this doubled-edged blade. She seeks to help the reader "live a happier, more fulfilling life" (p. xi). She believes that relationships are a pivotal determinant of life satisfaction and so urges the reader to create positive relationships with others. She initially focuses on self-exploration and then moves to interpersonal communication, attraction, friendship, intimate relationships, and the family. She also includes a

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chapter on careers. The presentation is informal and encouraging. Hanna peppers her analysis with interesting case studies and data drawn from her own life experiences. She motivates readers to consider the causes of problems and offers them many recommendations for improving their situation.

Hanna's comments on the nature of human happiness are often penetrating. Readers of *Person to Person* may also be able to apply the book's many recommendations in their own lives. The limitations that undermine the value of self-help books are not easily escaped, however. The conclusions offered are often oversimplified and do not always reflect current thinking about psychological dysfunction. For example, Hanna states that "excuses prevent happiness" (p. 12), "the first step in increasing self-esteem is to create a realistic ideal" (p. 27), and "studies show that androgynous people generally feel happier and handle stress better" (p. 64). Each one of these statements oversimplifies a complex issue. In addition, the recommendations offered tend to take the form of general advice based on good sense rather than psychological theory and research. She explains that "self-love is healthy and allows an individual to reach out positively to others" (p. 249), "joyful and peaceful times are too often unappreciated" (p. 125), "your behaviors reflect your thoughts" (p. 32), "anger is an emotion that can be put down but not out" (p. 104), and "using sarcasm or ridicule to make a critical point is harmful to the relationship" (p. 348).

One cannot criticize the goal of helping others help themselves. This goal, however, is an elusive one. As [Starker \(1988\)](#) concluded, "self-help titles, by and large, are repositories of unproven, sometimes unprovable, advice on matters of considerable importance and complexity" (p. 453). His general conclusion applies well in this particular case.

References

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Sharon L. Hanna, professor of psychology at Southeast Community College (Lincoln, Nebraska), is past national president of the Stepfamily Association of America and author of the forthcoming *Person to Person: Positive Relationships Don't Just Happen (2nd ed.)*.

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