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BETTER

*Community
Conversations:*

**TALKING ABOUT
MAKING A
MEANINGFUL AND
VALUED
CONTRIBUTION**

'People are assets. It's about time we valued them for what they can do'

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TALKING ABOUT . . .

MAKING A MEANINGFUL AND VALUED CONTRIBUTION

This short paper has been written to provide a platform for a Community Conversation on the topic of making a meaningful and valued contribution. It is designed to offer brief, but important information and thoughts on the topic which will enable all who participate in the conversation to have a common starting place. As a brief conversation starter, it cannot answer all the possible questions about how each individual can be supported to make their specific contribution, however we hope that it can provide enough to get people thinking, talking and seeking further assistance as their individual needs require. It is offered in the spirit of 'a conversation starter'.

INTRODUCTION – THE UNIVERSAL NATURE OF CONTRIBUTION

The majority of human beings have a deep desire to contribute, to give, to participate, to engage and to make a difference in the world in which they live. History is replete with examples of people who have made significant contributions to humanity and the planet through the fields of medicine, science, business, religion, conservation, sport, exploration and humanitarianism. Most of us though, are more likely to make contributions that do not reach the annals of history but are still significant. Some people will make contributions that are generally accepted as positive (or valued) and some people will make contributions to their families, neighbourhoods, communities and society that are not so positive. When people are gathered regardless of ethnicity, background, or age there is usually a great deal of agreement about what a valued contribution is and is not. For example, people usually agree that good parenting is a valuable contribution not only to the lives of the children concerned but also to society as a whole. They will agree that it is not wise to have too much time on your hands, to not be actively engaged in meaningful work. They will agree that more crime, thief, graffiti, violence and neglect of our most vulnerable citizens will not be good for individuals or society as a whole.

Every single person, regardless of their level of impairment, has interests, gifts, capacities and can contribute.

To make a contribution you must be able to give. By definition contribution is about one party 'giving to' another party which can be easily seen when the giver is a person who is perceived as having skills, talents or gifts such as IT skills, medical training, building experience etc. But what of the person who is significantly impaired? How can they contribute, how can they give, how can they be supported to fulfill their in-built desire to contribute?

SEEKING OUT A PERSON'S INTERESTS, GIFTS AND CAPACITIES

Many people have found the following statement to be very helpful:

**Every single person, regardless of their level of impairment,
has interests, gifts, capacities and can contribute.**

This statement is worthy of some deep reflection. If you accept it as true, that there is no-one who does not have interests, gifts and capacities then you are ready to set about the task of finding them for the person you are supporting (if you haven't already).

If you are not sure of its validity or if you think it untrue, think about the statement in relation to the person you are specifically supporting. Do they have gifts, interests and capacities? If you believe they do, you are ready to act. If you are struggling to recognise any at this present time it is an important question to resolve – how you resolve this question will heavily influence your actions around contribution.

It is often far easier for a person to make contributions through activities, pursuits or actions when they are interested in them. If you are unclear about the interests of the person you are supporting, you'll need to make the time to really investigate what they seem to enjoy. Experiment with new activities or adventures and look for clues which would give you guide.

In many situations people know much more about who the person is not and what they will never be than they do about who the person really is and what might be possible in their lives.

VALUED SOCIAL ROLES

There is a great deal of accessible material available on [Role Theory](#) and the power of people obtaining socially valued roles. If you deeply want your loved one to get a good life, which will include them making meaningful and valued contribution, we recommend an investigation into the detail of Social Role Valorisation (SRV).

In this short paper we would like to make two major (but very simplified) points about valued social roles:

1. The most sure fire way of supporting a person to make a valued contribution is to support them to take up and hold a valued social role.

Valued roles such as employee, colleague, small business owner, tenant, home owner, committee / trust member, volunteer, sports person, church member etc. all require the person who holds them to make a contribution. Making a contribution is a built in aspect of holding the role. When a person holds a valued role they will be making valued and meaningful contribution. Clearly some roles will offer more opportunity to contribute than others however this does not diminish from the fact that every role requires the person to make at least some contribution.

2. Even a small valued role can be life transforming.

When a person has few or no valued social roles in their life they are often isolated, lonely, devalued, poor, dependant on others and spending significant portions of their life being idle. When this is the case, the power of even one small role can be life transforming. Further, once a small valued role has been established, it is possible to grow this into a larger role with more relationships and contribution potential.

MEANINGFUL CONTRIBUTION AND AGE

As people grow and develop their capacity to make valued contributions also grows and develops. Small children may be able to contribute around the home by learning to brush their teeth, pick up clothes off the floor, tidy their toys etc. As they grow they could have set tasks around the house, jobs to fulfil within the family, afterschool or holiday jobs (roles). By adolescence people are generally engaged in a number of roles both within their family and the wider community.

A significant turning point is when a young person finishes high school and begins their adult lives. The school routines that have provided so much structure to life ends and new adult roles will need to be entered into. Ideally young people have been supported to craft out adult roles while they were still at school, but far too often this not the case for disabled youth.

Whether the age of the person you are supporting is 4, 14, 24 or 54 there is a **rule of thumb** that you can use to help you think about what valued roles and consequent opportunities for contribution, might be appropriate. The rule of thumb is:

- (i) Identify the person's gender, chronological age and ethnicity
- (ii) Think about other people who are the same/similar age, ethnic background and gender who do not face the same challenges as the person you are supporting i.e. these people are in valued roles and making meaningful contribution(s)
- (iii) Write down what roles, routines, activities, pursuits, contributions are made by the people in step you identified in step (ii): these become your guide for what would be ideal for the person you are supporting
- (iv) Clarify the gifts, interests and capacities of the person you are supporting and seek to craft out roles that are **age and stage appropriate** as determined by what was discovered in step (ii)

GETTING STARTED

Supporting a person to become an active and contributing member of their community is one of the most powerful ways we can support people who live their lives on the fringes of society. It can be a daunting task to think about, let alone to make progress on, but even the smallest of starts can have powerful and life changing effects for people. If you are reading this and wondering, where do I begin? You could try:

1. Reflect on the statement “Every single person, regardless of their level of impairment, has interests, gifts, capacities and can contribute. Ask yourself the question; do I believe this statement to be true for the person I am supporting?
2. Write down all of the interests, gifts, skills and capacities that you can see the person has. If you are struggling to identify these ask others for help.
3. Do the work of the **rule of thumb**. Identify how other people of the same age, gender and ethnic background make meaningful and valued contributions. Use what you discover as a guide for identifying what would be ideal for the person you are supporting.
4. Learn about Social Role Valorization (SRV). This social theory offers many practical strategies that will aid you in your efforts.
5. If you are struggling or stuck, seek help from others that have made headway. Ask them questions on how they have made progress. Keep asking until you find the right people to help you.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE YOU IN CONVERSATION ABOUT MAKING A MEANINGFUL AND VALUED CONTRIBUTION

- What is your loved one’s unique gifts, skills, capacities and aspirations?
- What engages them?
- What are the current contributions your loved one is making or has made in the past?
- What roles have they held in the past and what roles are they currently holding?
- What could you do now to build new roles? e.g. jobs around the house, after school jobs, holiday jobs, voluntary roles, paid or voluntary work, educational / study, recreation and leisure?
- Who can you reach out to if you want to find out more?