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No Advice Today
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Pursuing a career as a clinical psychologist seemed to be a good choice, but I was becoming an Ann Landers for my coworkers. I enjoyed exchanging stories, especially about personal situations as opposed to the weather or sports. In addition, I was the oldest woman in the office. I married, had children, turned forty, returned to college, and cared for aging parents, all before my colleagues had done these things. They perceived me as someone who had already handled many of the situations they now faced. I had a wealth of experience and was eager to share my views on handling life's problems with anyone wanting advice. I felt I had done a good job with my life so far and in cases where I fell short of my expectations, I surely knew how to help others avoid similar errors in judgment.

But eventually hearing problems everyday became burdensome. My energy started to wane, my temper became shorter, and I wanted peace. Based on my limited knowledge of behaviorism, I implemented an extinction procedure for the behavior of asking me for solutions to personal problems.

I first implemented my plan when a coworker, Donna, complained about her daughter's messy room. I listened but offered no advice. The exchange was awkward, as I wanted to make a suggestion or two. That afternoon another coworker, Cathie, started a conversation. She had five children, ages six to nineteen, and a husband who hadn't worked in three years. She asked if she should give him an ultimatum. I quickly made up an excuse to leave and retired to the rest room. So far, so good for that day.

I practiced the technique throughout the week until I had mastered it. But was I meeting my goal of having fewer people discuss their problems with me?

Coworkers continued to present their problems. By offering no advice, I thought I had eliminated the reinforcers for their behavior. Behaviorists note that an extinction procedure can produce "bursts"--a temporary increase in response rate and intensity. Maybe this was happening in my situation, so I decided to keep trying.

Although it was difficult I continued to ignore the target

behavior. When behavior still didn't change, I looked for extraneous reinforcers. Maybe I was still reinforcing the behavior in some way. Maybe just listening was a greater reinforcer than advice. I didn't want to completely ignore and alienate my coworkers. I appreciated some social contact for it contributed to a productive and pleasant work environment. So I used differential reinforcement of incompatible behavior (DRI).

I listened intently when coworkers spoke about anything other than a domestic problem, but politely ended the conversation when the target behavior seemed imminent. I purposely did not use instruction to strengthen the extinction process. I was dealing with adults and previously had accepted, if not encouraged, the target behavior.

Finally the DRI procedure succeeded in decreasing the advice seeking of my coworkers and office conversations became more pleasant. I no longer tried to solve everyone's problems and became selective about the few friends with whom I shared advice. The process was more complex and time consuming than I had anticipated. However, the stress reduction was worth the effort.