Social Support Shorts Episode 1: Communicating Your Needs with Grace

Well, hello again, friends. This is August with another episode of Social Support Shorts. Last time, we talked about uncovering undiscovered sources of social support. And before that, we talked about our Circle of Support, the Support Superpowers, and matching the Support Superpower to our need. All these activities and discussions were in service of having you receive the support you need and to help you feel supported.

We've kind of covered the 'what' of social support, the 'where' of where it can be found, but we have only really dipped our toes into the 'how,' and that's the focus of today's episode – tips on how to communicate your need for support, ways to improve the chance that you will receive it.

The focus here is communicating with the intent to bring your supports closer to you. Something we call Communicating with Grace, and within this are 3 intentions, which we will go through in this episode.

The first intention is to *say it with a smile*, the second intention is to *say it directly*, and the third intention is to *say it with grace*. Communicating with Grace includes not only being aware of the words that we use, but also the tone, and we will focus on that first.

Did you know that research shows that our tone changes if we say something with a smile? I'm going to say a sentence two times, listen carefully because one is said with a smile and the other isn't. The shoes were blue. The shoes were blue. (*Note: August uses different inflection for each of these last two sentences.*)

Now, which one do you think was said with a smile, the first or second sentence? If you said the second, you'd be right.

You may have noticed that the second sentence seemed a little warmer, perhaps a little sunnier. And you may have felt like it brought you in a bit – a little closer to me.

And now I invite you to try saying the same sentence the two different ways. We can try that now. Let's use that same neutral statement: "The shoes were blue." And try saying it with a straight face first now: "The shoes were blue." You may notice that this neutral statement is also neutral in tone when we say it that way, with a straight face.

Now, let's try saying it with a natural smile: "The shoes were blue." Did you notice a difference? The smile naturally warm the tone of your voice. You'd have to actively suppress it to sound neutral, and we'll try that now.

Smiling and saying it in the same neutral tone as if you weren't smiling: "The shoes are blue." It's hard, right? Isn't that interesting? So that's the first intention to bring others closer to us. *Say it with a smile*.

Now, *say it directly* is the second intention. Do you have a person in your life who communicates passively? They say something without directly saying it, like they are passing a hint. It's usually a statement meant to be neutral, but underneath it all is the communication of a need.

Other times, we may be the person communicating passively. I have certainly been guilty of that in the past. In my family, it was often our favourite way to communicate – maybe it was a pattern in your family as well.

But I learned that communicating passively wasn't getting my needs met. I was expecting others to do some heavy lifting and interpret my needs from that hint that I was passing.

Let's use an example of hoping that a Doer in our Circle of Support can support us by getting our groceries because we just haven't had enough time in that day. We may drop a hint like: "I just don't seem to have enough time in the day. There is always something I can't get to." Or even: "*Hopefully I can get to the grocery store this weekend."*

Well, what do you think of those statements? If someone said that to you, especially as a passing comment in a larger conversation, would you catch that they were expressing a need? Maybe not.

And what are the odds that the person would be supported? And how would they feel thinking that they did express a need, and it wasn't heard or acknowledged? Probably not great, right? Maybe a little let down?

Would that person feel more or less motivated to ask for support in the future? Probably not, because they feel like they aren't being heard, even though they aren't communicating their needs effectively.

But what if the statement was something like: "I just haven't had time to get to the grocery store, and I was wondering if you had the time to do it." What are the odds that this person would be supported? Much higher, right, and why?

Well, because they communicated their need very clearly. It wasn't hidden or embedded in another statement. And what are the odds that this person would feel supported? That their needs were being heard? Much higher as well, I'm sure.

And how would you feel if this was you? If those needs were being addressed and you had the comfort of knowing that this task was being taken care of.

Well, you may feel more secure in the support that surrounds you, and then you might be more likely to ask for support from others in the future. So that is our second intention: *say it directly,* so that your needs are clearly heard.

And our final intention, is the heart of communicating our needs effectively, and that is, *saying it with grace*.

I've already touched upon communicating our needs through *saying it with a smile,* so that our tone is warm. And the reason we need to speak with warmth is because it brings people in towards us. Tone makes a difference. Not only the tone of our voice, but the tone of our words.

Again, think about those requests for support that have been said to us in the past, but this time think of the ones that may have been a little more piercing.

Let's think back to a general example of this. When you were a teenager, did you ever have a parent say: “Your bedroom is a pigsty! I need you to clean it now.” Well, maybe this doesn't resonate with all of you, but I bet it does for some. And it certainly does for teenage August.

Now, what was your gut reaction to that statement? For me, and most likely for many of you, it was to be defiant, to actually back out of that conversation, and to not comply with that request.

Or it may be to escalate it into an argument. But either way, it wasn't going to get that parents need met. That room was not getting cleaned anytime soon. And that's because the research behind *saying things with grace* has shown that the choice of tone and phrasing will pull for a matching reaction.

And what I mean by that is that if you make a cold or hostile request, you can expect that the reaction from the other person will be cold or hostile as well. The person will actually turn away, rather than being pulled closer in.

If the same person said, or if the same parent said: “You are so good at keeping your room clean most of the time. I've noticed it's a little messy. Will you have time today to tidy it up a little?”

What do you think the response would be? Is your gut reaction a little different? Would the odds be in the parents' favour?

And let's ignore whether teen August is or isn't in the throes of teenage hood and practicing rolling his eyes and being actively defiant. Ignoring that, the odds would be in the parents' favour, that they would get a much warmer response.

And now our grocery example. What would your reaction be if a family member or friend said to you: “I'm not going to have time to get my groceries. I'd appreciate it if you did that for me.”

I mean, they did ask directly. But the tone, the words, right? What's your gut reaction there? Are you pulled in or put off? What's the chance this person will be supported? And then what's the chance the person will feel supported?

Now, what if the same person said with a smile, and all of our intentions: “I really appreciate the way that you have helped me in the past with tasks like picking up groceries. I haven't had time this week. It's just been jam-packed with stuff. Do you think you'll be able to help me by picking some up?”

What's your gut reaction there? You probably felt pulled in, correct? The same need was being expressed, but in such a different way. You were acknowledged for the past support you gave, then you were given a clear reason that the person needed support, and the support was requested from you directly.

It was said with the intention of bringing you closer, it was well thought out, it featured all the intentions, said with a smile for a warm tone, said directly, and it was said with grace using warm, inviting, appreciative phrasing. And that's the magic formula for Communicating with Grace and increasing the chance that you will not only be supported but also feel supported.

And now, an activity. I've talked in the past about taking little risks, and this is one of them. We want to take the little risks before we take the big ones, because the little ones are designed to set us up for a likely win.

And as I mentioned before, if we get that win, we're most likely to be able to lean on support in the future – we're more comfortable with requesting support.

So, the activity, you don't have to do this now but just keep it in mind. Next time you need support, I invite you to first look at your Circle of Support. What type of support is it that you need? Who is in your circle that can most likely meet that need? All right, now you have the person.

Next, take some time and think of the intentions. How can you structure and frame the requests so that it maximizes the chance that you will be supported and then feel supported.

How will you communicate to this person with grace? Are there ways that you have been supported in the past by this person, that you can recall in the conversation, and thank them for? Can you tie that to the new request? How would you word it?

These are just some things to consider, friends. I'm excited for you to try this out. And some of you may be practising one, two, or all three of the intentions already.

You may be thinking, yes, this works for some, or most of the people in my Circle of Support. But things get in the way. For example, there's this one person who just won't support me in the way that I need it – that can happen and it can be tough. And it's something we are going to discuss on the next episode of Social Support Shorts. For now, this is August. Signing off.