

Individualised Support

Whether autistic or not, professional helpers should always find out and go along with what the client aspires to. Too often professional support is dominated by preconceived ideas of what everybody ought to desire: paid work, own accommodation, sexual relationship, driving a car, going to the restaurant/cinema/clubs etc. for socialising, dress fashionable and so on. The general assumption is that the more of the above things are in place, the happier a person is and the more successful the help that offered to get there.

Yet who can determine what makes a person happy and their life successful? What is wrong with doing voluntary work, living in Community, being celibate, preferring solitude to socialising or wearing unusual clothes? Who can claim that Mother Theresa's life was less successful than for example Tony Blair's or Michael Jackson's?

Personally, I encountered too many professionals who did not enquire about my aspirations, but tried to impose on me their own ideas of what is important in life. To me, their goals were meaningless and their attempts to help left me alienated and without hope.

There is a passage in Eowyn Ivey's book "The Snow Child", where a woman is trying to understand a young lad who prefers to live alone in the wilderness rather than to stay in the farming community. "If you have a safe, warm home with a family, why would you want to be out there?" she asks him, to which he answers: "I guess maybe I don't want to be warm and safe. I want to live." (p.249). Later, the snow child is showing her a different kind of home, a home without walls, without a hearth, without furniture and without other people. Instead, the wide-open wilderness is full of surprises, full of adventures, full of challenges and of encounters with all sorts of rare animals. Bit by bit the woman (and the reader) understands that people have different kinds of aspirations and different ways of being happy.

In order to be of real help to individuals, professionals need to begin by listening with an open mind to what their client sees as a meaningful life, before identifying steps to reach those goals.

(Elkie Kammer, January 2016)