

Robinsons on Parallel Encouragement: a skill to learn

A class on Encouragement, how could a body miss!! I was very excited to take the course taught by Yoav Shoham at ICASSI, the international Adlerian Summer School in Switzerland. Our class was young and old and international with folks from Uruguay, Russia, Hong Kong, USA, Israel, and Romania.

Our teacher, Yoav, pointed out this fact, “You cannot teach someone how to encourage, only the principles. However, you can LEARN HOW TO ENCOURAGE,” and we students were ready to learn to encourage and to be encouraged. The class did both for us all. The spirit of encouragement is inside ourselves. How to express it verbally and non-verbally was the challenge of the course.

Think of a situation that you felt you needed encouragement, how did you feel in that situation? What did you need? How could you encourage yourself? All of us have experienced discouragement, and all of us could use a word, a look, a pat, a hug during the tough times. Our learned teacher pointed out there is a difference between encouraging phrases and compliments.

Encouragement will be judged by the results. It is not always the words we utter; it may be a knowledge that another “just believes in you.” Encouragement is doing what the other person needs. In situations where others are working to improve themselves, or are facing something that needs to be done, a “You can do it,” from a meaning cheerleader is very valuable.

When self-esteem is low, we are discouraged. When someone comes and helps us feel better about ourselves, it is a breath of fresh air, and we can begin again with new courage.

Encouragement is built on mutual respect. It contains elements such as these:

- Active listening
- Feelings of empathy
- Connected to the action
- Focused on the positive
- Shared thoughts and feelings
- Acceptance of others, just as they are

Obviously, encouraging words and actions foster all of these:

- Self Confidence
- A Sense of Belonging
- A Feeling of Safety
- A Positive Self Image

In a world that is too ready to criticize, especially within the family, learning to be genuinely encouraging is a challenge, but so worth it in terms of feelings of connectedness, acceptance, and warmth. In addition to criticism in families, nagging, over concern, worrying, pressure and (too) high expectations are discouraging elements.

Other discouraging elements between parents and children include punishment, rewards, insulting, overprotection, spoiling, and pampering. Ways we say to children, “I don’t think you can handle this on your own,” or “Here, let me do it for you,” actually stunt emotional growth.

On the other hand, “Let’s do it together” or “You are an important person in this family,” and “I appreciate your help,” provide emotional support.

Humor is a two edged sword. However, true humor is encouraging if we laugh WITH the person. Laughing AT the person is discouraging. Our teacher, Yoav Shoham, had us think of a person who angered us. Then he invited us to think about a positive characteristic about that same person. Such comments, to that person, as “You know a lot.” Or “It is important that you let me know what you know,” may well diffuse the situation, especially for YOU.

When a person can find a positive characteristic in the one who angers, two possible advantages come out:

1. You can say something honestly positive to that person.
2. OR you will simply think differently about the situation.

Studying the positive aspects of encouragement brought many of our hidden talents out. We were all given multiple opportunities to practice encouraging others as well as ourselves. Our model of encouragement was our teacher, Yoav Shoham.