

Marian Beane Crossing Borders Writing Competition  
How to Ask for Help  
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My name is Sophie. I am an international student from Leipzig, Germany. I have been fortunate enough to live in three different countries: Germany, the United States of America and Italy. Living in different places has opened my eyes on many different perspectives and norms, but one particular has stood out to me from growing up in Germany and now living in the United States— it is a good thing to ask for help and most of the time people enjoy helping you.

My parents were born and raised in the Soviet Union and always had a very clear idea of how my grades had to be, how I performed in athletics and how my mental health had to be, etc. To make it short, any sort of undesirable outcome was seen as a weakness. As a consequence, by the age of 14, I started struggling immensely with perfectionism. I developed an eating disorder, as I wanted to be seen as perfect and believed being thin would make people find me beautiful. I also rarely slept more than four hours a night, because I wanted to do well in school. I exercised multiple hours a day to become a better athlete. Thinking back on it now, I felt like I was constantly competing against everyone else. I did not want to seem weak, so I tried to out-do everyone around me.

Just before I turned 18, I received an offer to play tennis at a school in North Carolina, which ultimately saved me from these unhealthy behaviors that I had internalized. My parents set a clear weight goal that I had to achieve before I could go and had gotten me professional help to work on my eating habits. My university also did not require me to have a specific grade to enter, so I was able to reduce my eagerness of getting perfect grades.

In August 2016, I finally moved to the United States of America. When I arrived, I was shocked. My former coach picked me up from the airport and we started driving. I remember we were driving forever. We were driving through the middle of nowhere. Until we finally arrived at the school. I was shocked, to say the least. Growing up in a large city in Germany, I did not have a car and even my mother did not drive. We would always walk, take our bikes or use public transport to get from A to B. I asked my coach what options I would have to get to places, and he said, “most of our internationals just ask their friends to take them.” Would I have to ask for help every time I needed groceries, run errands or even if I just wanted to leave the campus?

As much as I resisted asking individuals for help at first (by walking miles just to get a coffee, get some groceries, and so on), eventually I would give in. For the first two years, the most dreaded questions for me were to ask people if they would help me get to the airport which was about an hour there and an hour back. Of course, I would offer to pay whoever drove me, but often people rejected and said, “it’s fine, one day you can return the favor.” In addition, I found that the people I asked enjoyed helping me – like people actually enjoy giving someone the assistance they need, which I am so thankful for that I have finally internalized that.

As silly as it may sound, asking people to drive me changed the way I thought on the whole perspective of asking for help. I absolutely never asked anyone for help and found it strange that I had to then (nevertheless, if someone asked me, I would always help in any way that I could). From where I stand now, I can see how much my competitive behavior that I developed as an adolescent hindered me from letting other people aid me. My perfectionism brought me to believe that I can do everything I set my mind to by myself. Learning how to ask for help has helped assisted me also with my personal struggles, such as the need to constantly

compare myself to others whether this was on how I looked, how I played (tennis) or how I did academically.

Overall, I cannot say that I am always asking for help now when I should. I just moved to Charlotte during a pandemic without knowing anyone but my partner, with financial stress and not having been able to see my family for 2 years. I have definitely not asked for help as much as I did at my undergraduate institution, or even as much as I should. I have been having trouble meeting people in a fully online, social distancing format, but I am not where I was when I first came to the United States. Just like I would immediately help someone in need, I know that someone would also help me – and knowing that is worth so much.