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# In This Crisis, Giving People Financial Gifts Can Lead to Bad Feelings

Recipients can feel embarrassment and shame—unless you're smart about it

*By Grant Donnelly and Ashley Whillans*

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With the pandemic forcing millions of Americans into financial distress, it is only natural to want to lend friends and family a hand.

But giving them a gift to help them out can do a lot of harm—unless you do it the right way.

In new research, we find that people who receive money or other gifts feel embarrassed, ashamed and generally terrible about themselves when those gifts directly address their financial needs. But our research also shows that if the gift givers frame what they're giving in the right way, they can avoid triggering bad feelings and leave the recipient a lot better off.

Why do people feel so bad after receiving gifts of assistance? These gifts can highlight their inability to meet their own basic needs, and make recipients feel lower in social status relative to the gift giver. Gift recipients may also feel less close to the gift giver and less appreciative of their helping efforts.

All those uncomfortable feelings are magnified because gift givers—naturally—want to spell out why they are giving something. And that explanation usually sounds like, “I know you’ve been stressed for cash, and wanted to help you out.”

Our research, however, shows that there are more subtle ways to explain a gift that soften the blow. Instead of explicitly tying the help to assistance, try saying, “I wanted to give you this gift,” which doesn’t highlight the recipients’ circumstances. That approach got much better reactions from participants than a flat-out “I wanted to help,” even though the nature of the gift was obvious (especially when the gift was cash).

You could also speak about the events that have led to the current situation: “One month ago, who would have imagined that life would be like this today?” By spelling out that the circumstances are outside of their control, you help gift recipients feel less responsibility for their current financial situation.

Framing a gift as a way to alleviate time stress, rather than financial stress, also resulted in more positive outcomes. Let’s say you want to purchase your friends’ groceries. You might say, “I know you’ve been busy lately, and I wanted to give you this gift in hopes that it will save you time.”

None of this should be taken as a suggestion to stop trying to solve others’ financial needs. Instead, take a moment to consider how best to communicate why you are helping. By being deliberate, you will be able to address not only your friends’ objective financial needs, but their psychological needs, as well.

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