Excerpt from Happy: Blueprint for a Supportive Culture

It's Someone Else's Problem

Even when we are aware that members of our inner and outer circles are struggling, we oftentimes fundamentally misunderstand how much support they are receiving from others.

Usually we greatly overestimate the support they are receiving from others.

My mother is 75 years old and struggling to accept her mortality. I typically convince myself that her friends and my dad are helping her navigate these worrying waters. In reality, most of the time, they are not. My mom spends many hours of her days and nights in a state of emotional unrest. During many of these hours, I am sitting around assuming she has all the support she needs.

My older brother has a high pressure job in the government and a family that includes three highly active kids who are straight from storybooks. Someone or something demands my brother's attention from sun up to sun down. And when he collapses into his couch late at night, he oftentimes hasn't had a chance to tell a single person the stories of his day. Sometimes this exhausting existence goes on for months. I rarely talk to him about it. I assume he gets all the support he needs from his wife and that, mostly, he wants to spend his uncommitted time alone.

But he doesn't. He does want to spend time alone, but he also wants to connect with other people, sharpen his wit, expand his horizons, reminisce and ponder the future.

And while he's sitting around not getting any of that, I'm often sitting around assuming he is.

My best friend struggles with addiction. He lives in a community whose primary purpose is to help people struggling with addiction. It's easy for me to get comfortable with the idea that my best friend is getting all the support he needs.

I recently went to visit him and discovered that, in reality, he arguably has no one supporting him on a regular basis. That was difficult to see. It crystallized for me that the picture I had painted of my best friend's support system was nothing more than the picture I wanted it to be - a
picture that conveniently relieved me of the responsibility of supporting him myself.

If I were able to conjure the actual picture of my best friend's support system, not a day would pass when I wouldn't call him.

* You can probably relate to these misunderstandings.

How easy is it for you to build theoretical support systems for your friends and family that don't include you?

This is a completely natural tendency. Accurately assessing our inner circles' support systems would invariably lead to the realization that they need a lot more support than they are getting, and some of that support needs to come from us.

Because it can be exhausting and uncomfortable to provide such support, we create and immerse ourselves in alternative realities where our support is unnecessary.

Because the people closest to us habitually underestimate the support we are getting, many of us don't get nearly the support we need from the people who are our primary protectors in life.

* There is a simple way to eliminate these misunderstandings:

We must assume that the people closest to us are not getting the support they need, and we must commit ourselves to keeping them cared for, week in and week out.