

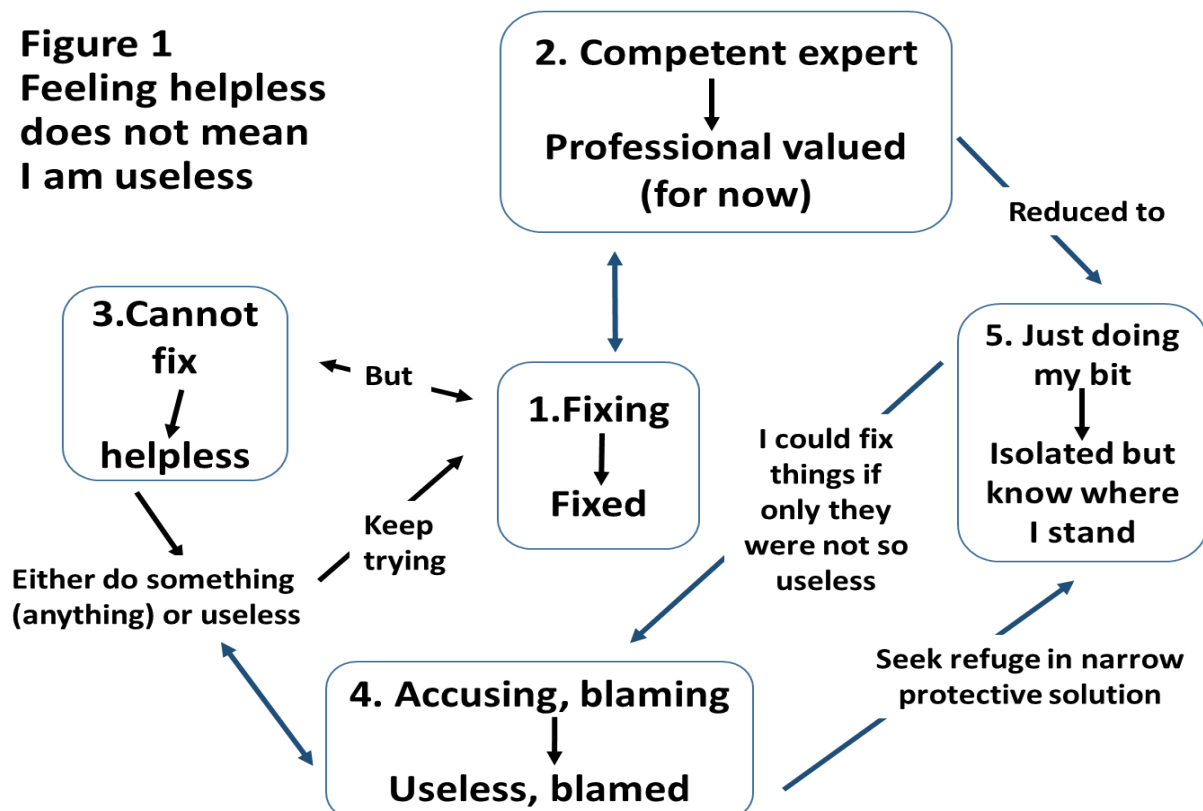
## Feeling helpless does not mean we are useless

One very normal response to the coronavirus pandemic is to feel helpless as to how to fix things and respond to changing patterns of relating at work or home. This example of mapping relational awareness shows how it is easy to slide from feeling helpless to feeling useless and to feel under too much pressure to fix things to the extent we do more than we need to or look for someone to blame for doing nothing.

The diagram starts at point 1 in the middle of the map with the pressure to fix things. It is voiced like this. *“If I can fix things for others, I am competent feel valued by others.”* The healthy pay off takes us to **box 2** on the map and a feeling of doing things as a competent expert valued by colleagues and society. Feeling professionally valued in this way re-enforces pride in fixing things to the point where it may be overvalued, and it becomes a source of shame or blame when things and people cannot be fixed. Every day we meet things that cannot be fixed and need help from others or time and new thinking to fix them.

There can be a pattern of relating both within us and in the team and wider society that goes something like this. *“If I am fixing things then I am competent and therefore valued which biases me to want to fix things more. We become addicted to fixing things and rush into action too quickly and risk missing out on shared thinking time. This can make us feel like action man or woman, but it ends up being a fragile and exposed position with us worrying whether we have got things wrong or failed to take people along.”*

**Figure 1**  
**Feeling helpless**  
**does not mean**  
**I am useless**



In such a pattern we feel helpless (box 3 on the map) when we cannot fix things. Feeling helpless about something can shift under the pressure of organisational, professional, or political scrutiny to feeling useless. It might be voiced like this: ***“I, or we as a team, will do anything to avoid the painful mix of feeling of point 4 (of self-accusing and blaming or expecting others to be accusing or blaming).”***

The pressure to do something becomes intolerable and risky. Time for reflection is swept away. Position 4 on the map is a dreaded place that can easily be merged with feelings of helplessness. Not knowing what to do now is confused with never knowing what to do. Not *‘taking action’* is seen as ‘weak’ or ‘neglectful’. The pattern seems to invite a response to do anything rather than feel useless. We will push others to do things. The nurse will prompt action from the doctor, the teacher from the parent, the manager to the team, the politician to the people, the social worker to the psychologist and so on. The politicians will promise or pretend to do something rather than feel useless for being helpless. Supplementary patterns to this are. ***“I could fix things if only the other lot were not so useless. If we are feeling helpless someone, somewhere else must take the blame and be accused of being useless.”***

In the face of this there is a place of retreat in *‘just doing my bit’*. It is the *‘solo-in the-silo’* solution. This position (point 5 on the map) is reassuring in part: at least I know where I stand with myself and my small part of the job or professional orbit. It allows some esteem and it may result in good quality work but in a fragmented system. With limited awareness of the relationships of the parts to the whole the individual good work may be isolated or swept away. From within the silo/solo position there is the risk of a voice saying. ***“I could fix things if only others would work with me or were not so useless or rigid.”***

Mapping this ‘Helpless is not Useless’ pattern should offer an increase in relational awareness. But it can also point to ways out to a better resolution. One key response is to tolerate helplessness and not so quickly convert it to uselessness. A simple example may help highlight this. I am cycling and have a flat tyre. I have one problem – the flat tyre. I try and fix it but cannot and feel helpless. Now I have two problems, one with the tyre and one with me feeling helpless. At this point I could seek help and share the problem or tolerate my helplessness. Or I can add a third problem in judging myself as useless. Ultimately the flat tyre can be fixed with help. The feeling of being helpless can be sorted with self-acceptance, trust in others or skill training. However, the merger of feelings of helplessness and uselessness create a kind of wounded sense of self where I am the flat tyre which is a much more difficult repair job since I am the cause of the puncture.

Potter, S. (2014) ‘The helper’s dance list’. In J. Lloyd and P. Clayton (eds) *Cognitive Analytic Therapy for People with Intellectual Disabilities and their Carers*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

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