Listening to and Talking with Fellow Students

A Guide for Peer Counselors, Peer Educators, and Peer Advisers

Sheila M. Reindl and M. Suzanne Renna

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS

IN THE COLLEGE YEARS is a collection of essays, teaching materials, and other publications from the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard University. The collection adopts its name from the classic study, *Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1968) by William G. Perry, Jr., the founding director of the Bureau.
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NOTE

The authors grant permission for use of this handout to the Bureau of Study Counsel, Harvard University. Parts of the text are taken directly from previous handouts: Reindl and Renna’s “Listening to Students: A Guide for Resident Tutors” and “What Should I Do? Guidelines for Friends, Lovers, Roommates, and Relatives of People with Eating Disorders” as well as Reindl’s “The Company We Keep: Thoughts on the Nature, Power, and Expression of Empathy on a Campus Hotline.” Those handouts are available in hard copy from the authors.
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As a peer counselor, peer educator, or peer adviser, what is your role with your fellow students? Perhaps your main role is to be a fellow human being and to provide the presence and perspective of someone who has a bit (or a lot) more experience considering the things that matter to college students. You’ll convey this presence and perspective by the way you live your own life and by the way you talk with your peers about their experience.

Is there anything in particular to know about how one listens to and responds to one’s fellow students? What makes for good conversations and relationships with one’s peers are the things that make for good conversations and relationships with anyone whose experience we care to know and appreciate. The following list of suggestions for peers talking with peers derives from the experience of counselors at the Bureau of Study Counsel at Harvard University, who have been and continue to be involved in the training and supervision of peer counselors, peer educators, and peer advisers.

1. Be a positive presence by being an active listener.

You can listen to someone’s concerns without making it your responsibility to solve their problems. By asking questions and reflecting back your understanding of what has been told to you, you help your fellow students to know themselves better. You keep them company while encouraging them to find their own voice and their own way. Listening to their experience and being curious about how they are managing, how they are feeling, and how they are making sense of their choices conveys your respect for them as intelligent and capable beings.
2. A-B-C: Acknowledge, Be curious, Challenge.

As a rule of thumb, we are wise to **acknowledge** someone’s experience and to **be curious** to explore that experience in some depth and complexity **before** we try to **challenge** a limited perspective by offering alternative perspectives. We need to first join someone at his/her window on the world, see things from that person’s point of view, and appreciate what is important to the person about the particular stance he/she is taking before we can presume to interest that person in considering alternatives.

To empathize, we need not necessarily approve of or agree with the person’s feeling or stance. But we do need to acknowledge and appreciate that feeling or stance. We might think that there is a more useful or a healthier perspective the person could take. But if we try to talk the person into shifting his/her perspective, we are apt to leave the person feeling unheard, misunderstood, and frustrated. You might know from personal experience that before you can consider a new stance or perspective, you first need to know that someone recognizes the legitimacy and importance of your own way of making sense.

Don’t try on someone else’s perspective instrumentally just so that he/she will take yours. That would be manipulative and disrespectful. Take a look at his/her perspective out of genuine curiosity and respect.

Examples of acknowledging someone’s experience:

- “How frustrating.”
- “At the time, it kind of made sense to you, and yet now you feel so awful....”
- “Sometimes, learning from experience just plain sucks.”
- “It wasn’t what you were expecting....”

Examples of being curious to explore the depth and complexity of someone’s experience:

- “As you think about it, when do you mark that shift in your experience?”
- “As you look at it now, what do you find yourself regretting most?”
- “What surprised you?”
- “Looking forward, what do you imagine you’d want to take with you from this experience?”

Examples of challenging a limited perspective:

- “Is your disappointment necessarily an indication that you made the wrong choice there?”
- “You’re right. You do need to do this on your own – no one can make those changes for you. But you don’t need to do it all alone.”
- “Maybe your ‘becoming less friendly’ means you’re redefining what you want in a friendship.”
- “Does it have to be all or nothing?”

3. Focus first on feelings (but don’t feel you have to say the perfect thing).

It can be helpful to simply name a feeling or an experience: “What a let-down.” “How annoying.” “It sounds like you feel misled.” “It feels so unjust.” “So you’re left with this deep sense of regret.” “And even though you tell yourself that you aren’t responsible for someone else’s choices, you somehow feel guilty.” It’s often a comfort just to
know that another human being can recognize and name what we feel. In that moment of having our feelings named, we feel less alone, less weird, more human, more hopeful.

In our effort to sense someone’s feelings, we might feel that we have to be precisely attuned, that we have to hit the note that will break the glass. Instances of perfect attunement are powerful human encounters; they are moments of emotional intimacy and authenticity—typically marked by tears of sorrow, or a sigh of relief, or a chuckle of recognition, or an “Exactly” or a “Yes” and followed by a desire to elaborate upon the clarifying sense of understanding and recognition the person has just experienced.

But we don’t always hit the perfect note. And that’s okay. If we offer our sense of someone’s feelings with a willingness—even a desire—to be corrected in the service of better understanding his/her felt experience, the person will often help us refine our attunement: “It’s not just that I feel misled. What’s worse is that I feel like a fool.” “No, it’s not so much that I feel guilty. It’s more that I feel so helpless. And so sad.” In the process of the person’s naming more precisely his/her experience, we are both brought nearer to the center of that person’s truth.

Empathy is an effort to understand someone’s experience as the person experiences it. Our effort is to sense the person’s experience in some complexity and to convey that we “really get it,” or are trying to, while at the same time indicating that we are open to the person’s revisions and refinements of our understanding. We say, in effect, “I sense that this is how things feel to you – is that what it’s like?”

4. Go easy on giving information and advice. When you do give information or advice, give it in a context. And ask how the advice sits with someone.

Advice is most welcome in response to a request. Unless someone asks directly for information or advice, we are wise to try first to acknowledge and explore that person’s experience in the way the person experiences it before going on to offer our recommendations. Otherwise, the person might feel as if we do not appreciate the uniqueness, complexity, or enormity of the situation, and our efforts will be experienced as unempathic or unhelpful. Unsolicited advice risks leaving someone feeling diminished, bored, or insulted.

On the other hand, if someone asks outright for information or advice, we need to acknowledge that request and make some sort of response to it, or we risk leaving someone feeling unheard and frustrated, as if we are dodging or withholding. Even when we do provide information or offer advice, our response will be most useful if we are first curious to understand the context that gives rise to the request and to discern what is really being asked (i.e., the question behind the question). Once we’ve addressed the request, we might ask if the information or advice we have provided is in fact on the mark of what the person was hoping for. We might also want to acknowledge the limited usefulness of even “useful” information and advice.

Examples of giving information or advice in a context:

- “I want to answer your question as well as I can. So it would help me to know what you’ve tried already. How did that go? What else have you considered doing? What would be your hope in doing that? And what do you see as the risks in that approach?”

- “I know, it can be so frustrating when people make jokes about antidepressants and other medications. A couple of times I’ve found myself saying to people something like, ‘I suppose we never know whether someone in this very room is taking those medicines, or has someone dear to them who is.’ Hard to tell how that goes over. Have you done, or thought of doing?”

- “The short answer to your question is that while we often think of alcohol tolerance as a good thing, it’s actually a dangerous thing in a sense. If you want, I can explain why that is.”

- “It sounds like you are already familiar with the idea of estimating your BAC (blood alcohol concentration). So you might already know this – but I have to admit, I didn’t know this until recently – that your BAC can continue to rise even after you pass out.”
• “You might already know this, but the BMI (body mass index) was originally developed as a population-based measure, not as an individual-based measure, and certainly not as means to assess an individual’s health. It doesn’t take into account body type, muscle mass, degree of fitness, etc. So it’s worth talking with a nutritionist or other professional who really understands both the power and the limitations of that measure and who can advise you about what it does and doesn’t mean for you.”

Examples of asking how the advice sits with someone:

• “Is this the sort of information you were hoping for? Is this information helpful to you? In what way?”

• “Is this getting at what you wanted to know?”

• “What would be more helpful, do you think?”

• “And in asking that question, are you also asking what your responsibility is to your roommate and whether it’s okay not to make a heroic effort on his/her behalf?”

Don’t feel you have to know everything. It can be helpful for people to see that, despite our training and experience, we don’t know all the answers. We can model for the person how we accept our limitations and how we search for and find out what we need to know.

Examples of acknowledging the limits of what you can offer:

• “I wish I could give you a sure-fire plan of how to approach your friend so that she would seek help. Unfortunately, there is no such plan. What I can do is share some general guidelines based on what other people have found helpful, and we can think together about how they apply to your situation and to what you’re considering doing.”

• “Having suggested these various strategies, I’m aware that changing what we do is not that simple. I mean, you’ve probably come up with good advice and strategies of your own. If only change were simply a matter of knowing what to do.”

• “Good question. In all honesty, I don’t know the answer to that. I’d like to check in with my supervisor and see what he/she has to say. Is there some way we could be back in touch about this one?”

• “It might also be helpful to speak with a counselor about this. Is that something you’re considering? Would it be useful to talk about how to find a referral?”

5. Beware of offering reassurance (e.g., “I’m sure you’ll do fine”), generalization (e.g., “Most sophomores feel that way”), or identification/over-identification (e.g., “I went through the exact same thing”).

These efforts have their place, but if offered too soon in a conversation, they are likely to be experienced as unempathic because they presume sameness (“Your experience is exactly like mine (or that of someone else I know)”) and certainty (“I am sure I know just what you are going through”). When we presume sameness and certainty, we fail to listen, to be curious about the particulars of the other person’s experience, and to appreciate that each person is unique. Even what would seem to be a common or shared experience won’t be felt in exactly the same way by two different people. Empathy, by contrast, presumes separateness and the imperative to be curious, to listen, to learn from the other. Empathy and curiosity tend to deepen – rather than deadend – a conversation. They also help to deepen a person’s own sense of connection – to self, to other/you, and to the experience of learning: “And so you’re surprised to find yourself disappointed?” “What is it that you find really captures your interest these days?” “And so something has shifted for you?” “It’s clear to me, even as you talk about it, that something important is at stake for you in this. I wonder, do you
know what about it really matters to you?”

If you do share your own experiences, consider sharing some core sense of your experience rather than the details of it. Offer your experience for what it is: your experience. What you have learned from your own struggles might not be relevant or true for someone else. But knowing that you, too, have struggled and still struggle can create a bridge for communication when someone is feeling ashamed or embarrassed.

6. Don’t feel you need to cheer the person up.

We often resort to advice, reassurance, and other means of trying to talk someone out of his/her perspective and into some other one because we cannot bear to stay with him/her in his/her pain. It simply feels too painful. In their literature on pain, the Samaritans talk about the importance of not fearing someone else’s pain, and in fact, the importance of accepting the pain:

Motorists will know that the correct way to bring a skidding car under control is to turn the steering wheel in the direction in which the car is skidding. By turning into the skid, one is bringing the steering apparatus into alignment with the movement of the car. This action is counter to the natural inclination to turn the car sharply in the opposite direction. The maneuver is analogous to what is, to my mind, the correct way to respond to people who are suffering. Instead of trying to alleviate or divert attention from the pain, I believe that one should focus down on it, encourage its emergence, and be accepting of it . . . . [If you accept a person’s pain,] you have turned into the skid and brought the sufferer into alignment with his suffering. (Birchnell, J. (1978) Turning into the skid. The Samaritan, No.22, 3-5, & No. 23, 8-11.) [Note: The advice to turn into the skid applies to a rear-wheel skid.]

7. When expressing concern to someone, use “I” language rather than “You” language.

We live in a culture in which people are very prone to shame. Many people fear that if they are having a hard time, or if they need someone else’s consultation or help, they must be weak, inadequate, or defective. In many students’ minds, experiencing human struggle and human pain is tantamount to failure. So when we talk with someone, we want to take care not to inadvertently leave that person feeling that we are looking down on him/her with pity or judgment.

When you talk with people directly, and when you advise people who are considering approaching someone they’re concerned about, it’s important to keep in mind that “I” language serves better than “You” language. That is, in expressing our concern, we are wise to speak of our own experience rather than assume that we know what is true for the other person. When we speak in “I” statements, we take responsibility for our response. When we speak in “You” statements, we tend to make judgments about the person, which leave him/her feeling the need to take a defensive position.

Examples of “You” statements:

- “You are working too hard.”
- “You need help.”
- “You need to take this more seriously.”

Examples of “You” statements disguised as “I” statements:

- “I think you are out of control.”
- “I think you are just trying to get attention.”

These are not true “I” statement despite the use of the first-person pronoun because they refer to the speaker’s judgment of the other per-
son or to the speaker's assessment of that person's motivations rather
than to the speaker's own experience of the person.

[Note: "You" statements can be appropriate and useful when they
express basic rights (e.g., "You deserve better"; "You have a right to
your own life"; "You have a right to be who you are") or when they
express specifically referenced statements of fact (e.g., "Actually, you
can't assume that just because some people drink while taking antide-
pressants that that's safe for you. You'd be wise to ask your prescriber
about whether it's possible for you to drink while on that medicine").

Examples of "I" statements:

- "I've noticed that you don't smile as much as you used to. What's
  up?"

- "I feel afraid that you're hurting yourself. I'm concerned that your
  health could be in danger, and even your life. I need for us to make
  sure that you are safe."

- "I know I've been avoiding talking to you about how concerned I
  am for fear of intruding. But given what I'm noticing — that I see
  you looking gaunt and preoccupied, that you said your grades are
  slipping, and that others are saying you just don't seem like yourself
  — I am concerned. And I'm wondering if you are as well."

8. Don't take responsibility for things over which you have no power; recognize those things over which you do have power.

Ultimately, we don't have power over whether someone seeks
help, stays with help, manages his/her difficulty or disorder in the way
we would hope he/she would, or treats himself/herself with care and
respect. We might wish all of those things for someone. We might
wish them from the bottom of our heart. We might make ourselves
available to talk. We might recommend counselors and booklets and
handouts and other resources. We might stand by someone as he/she
calls to make an appointment; we might make the call on his/her be-
half; we might offer to accompany the person to an appointment. But
ultimately, we do not have power over another person's choice of how
— or whether — to live. (Note: We are referring to people who are of a
certain age. Parents appropriately have more power and responsibility
in the lives of children. And yet parents will recognize even in the exu-
berance of a toddler's emphatic "No!" the self's determination to be in-
cluded and respected in the making of choices.)

What we do have power over — and what we can take responsibil-
ity for — is the choice to express our concern to someone. Although we
cannot know whether or how another person will receive our concern,
we can still take responsibility for expressing it.

9. Allow yourself to bear the feeling of helplessness. Aim
to serve, not "help."

We sometimes work with the mistaken belief that there is a right
thing to do with someone who has a particular difficulty or disorder
and that if we did that right thing, then the person would be helped
and we would not feel helpless. When we believe that, we misunderstand
our helplessness as a sign that we are not doing enough. It is a
fact that we are ultimately helpless over making another person feel
some other way or be some other way. Our helplessness is not neces-
sarily a sign that we should be doing something else; it is a sign that
there is a limit to what we can do to make another person be or feel
something else.

A sense of helplessness often comes with the territory of trying to
help someone. But while helplessness is hard to bear, it is bearable. It is
important to remember that while we are helpless over some things —
like making someone change — we are not helpless over expressing our
genuine concern to someone.

Our sense of helplessness becomes more bearable when we under-
stand that we are aiming not so much to help as to serve. We can serve
as someone who will listen and empathize, someone who will offer
(timely and attuned) advice or information, someone who will non-
judgmentally explore both the benefits and burdens of the person’s approach to their difficulty. We can aim to influence someone’s experience by those basic efforts, but we are wise not to get invested in particular outcomes or timetables of change. And we are wise not to see our sense of truth as The Truth or the way we would do things as The Right Way to Do Things.

10. Consider how you yourself would want to be treated if you were the one seeking consultation or advice from a peer.

If you have ever sought advice based on concern about yourself or concern about someone else, you probably wanted the person you spoke with to regard you as an equal, not as someone to be pitied or somehow considered ignorant or “less than.” You probably wanted the person with whom you spoke to be mindful that you had strengths as well as struggles. This is worth keeping in mind as you talk with people who come to you in your role as a peer mentor of some sort.

It is also worth keeping in mind as you advise someone about how to approach a friend whose behavior and/or safety are of concern. You might want to ask the concerned friend to recall or imagine being approached by someone who had a concern about his/her well-being or behavior (e.g., about his/her procrastination, obsessiveness, work habits, eating habits, drinking habits, under- or over-sleeping, exercising too much or too little). Would he/she prefer be approached by one person or by several? In what setting? How would he/she want people to broach the topic? What could make this difficult situation more or less bearable? How would he/she want the concerned friend(s) to treat him/her after this conversation? Putting oneself in the shoes of the person of concern can help us to appreciate that person’s experience.

11. Refer people to others as needed, but let them know that you are still there for them.

Sometimes you will want to make a referral to someone who can spend more time with a particular person or who has professional expertise. Whenever possible, refer to a particular person (or a few particular people) rather than to a place. It’s easier for someone to follow up on a more personal rather than anonymous referral. Sometimes, in an effort to facilitate a referral, you might even decide to place a phone call to a professional while a person is in your presence. In any event, make it clear to the student that by referring him/her to someone else you are not abandoning him/her. In fact, encourage him/her to check back in with you (or, if it would be appropriate to your role, let him/her know to expect that you will check back with him/her just to hear how things went).

When you have referred someone to counseling, it’s worth noting that it’s usually clear to someone in a first session or two whether he/she clicks with the particular counselor. If someone reports that the session just didn’t feel right, or that the counselor wasn’t on his/her wavelength, ask the person to describe what didn’t work. Let him/her know that it’s important to find a good fit and that it’s perfectly fine to try someone new. Ask the person if he/she can describe, by virtue of what didn’t feel right, what would feel better (e.g., if the person felt the counselor was too quiet, or not playful enough, it might be worth meeting with someone who is more interactive or who has a different sense of humor). Part of our job is to help people discern what does work for them. Once someone has articulated what he/she is looking for in a counselor, you or the student are in a better position to reach out to a professional (dean, advisor, coach, mental health professional) to recommend someone who might fit the bill.

Even once someone has found a good match, the process of change can be slow. It can be useful to predict the course and pace of change. The student might still hurt and struggle for some time to come.

In fact, people engaged in counseling or psychotherapy often feel worse before they feel better because they are no longer defending
against the source and depth of their pain. We live in a culture that values swift solutions and that sees pain as something to be quickly quelled. But in the realm of human growth and development, we need to tolerate pain long enough to learn what it has to teach us. Even though change might take time, the hope is that in the meantime, the student in a counseling relationship feels more hope and support in his/her efforts to face what needs facing.

12. Don’t go it alone.

When you find that a conversation with someone leaves you feeling anxious about the person’s safety or well-being, or when you find that the person needs more than you can appropriately provide in your role, seek consultation for yourself from your supervisor or a professional (e.g., at your campus mental health service, counseling center, or advising office). You need never apologize for seeking someone’s counsel or guidance in such matters. In fact, it is your responsibility to do so. Consultation is a way to be responsible to others and to self. Consulting with someone can help you to discern how to continue your connection with the person and how to help the person get the additional resources he/she needs. You might worry that in seeking support from a professional, the professional will take over or violate the confidentiality you’ve promised someone. Yet you might wish that a professional would step in to handle a situation that feels overwhelming. Without identifying a student, you can ask for help about how you might handle a situation, and you can ask a professional how he/she would handle the situation if he/she were to get involved.

“Sheila Reindl and Suzanne Renna have beautifully described the intimate dance we have with others and ourselves as we listen and respond to the melody that others share with us. If only more people could subscribe to these guiding ideas, the world as a whole would be such a kinder, gentler, and responsive space.”

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