Listening to and Talking with Fellow Students:  
A Guide for Peer Counselors, Peer Educators, Peer Fellows, and Peer Advisers

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This handout is the latest version of a handout that also exists in other versions – one created for advisers and another for proctors and resident tutors. We provide the overview below in hopes that it will help you read strategically and selectively depending on your particular interest and purpose.

What is your role with your fellow students? As a peer counselor, peer educator, peer fellow, or peer adviser, what is your role with your fellow students? Perhaps your main role is to be a fellow human being and to offer a sense of presence and perspective. You do this largely by listening to your peers and keeping them attentive, attuned company as the two of you explore and consider what’s on their minds.

Is there anything in particular to know about how one listens to and responds to fellow students? What makes for good conversations and relationships with students are the things that make for good conversations and relationships with anyone whom we aim to welcome into a community and whose experience we care to know and appreciate. The following list of suggestions derives from the experience of the staff of the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University who talk with students as well as with faculty, administrators, residential staff, and others in the University who work with students. You might recognize many of these as approaches and perspectives that you already naturally, intuitively take in listening to and talking with fellow students. If conversation is an art, our effort here is to help peer counselors, peer educators, peer fellows, and peer advisers connect with what they trust to, or rely upon, in their ever-developing art of having conversations with their fellow students.

1. Offer a greeting or sense of welcome.
2. Be a positive presence by being an active listener.
3. A-B-C: Acknowledge and Be curious before Challenging.
4. Beware of offering reassurance (e.g., “I’m sure you’ll do fine”), normalization/generalization (e.g., “Most sophomores feel that way”), identification/overidentification (e.g., “I went through the exact same thing”).
5. Don’t feel you need to cheer the person up.
6. Attend to felt experience and feelings (but don’t feel you have to say the perfect thing).
7. Go easy on giving advice. When you do give advice – or even information – give it in a context. And ask how the advice or information sits with someone.
8. When expressing concern to someone, use “I” language rather than “You” language.
9. Don’t take responsibility for things over which you have no power; recognize those things over which you do have power.
10. Allow yourself to bear the feeling of helplessness. Aim to serve, not “help.”
11. Consider how you yourself would want to be treated if you were the one seeking consultation or advice from a peer.
12. Communicate directly about your hopes and limitations.
13. Communicate directly about the role(s) in which you find yourself listening and responding.
14. Refer people to others as needed, but let them know that you are still there for them.
15. Don’t go it alone.

*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 their handouts “Listening to Students: A Guide for Proctors and Resident Tutors” and “What Should I Do? Guidelines for Friends, Lovers, Roommates, and Relatives of People with Eating Disorders” and from Sheila Reindl’s handout “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.
Here are elaborations on each of these pointers:

1. **Offer a greeting or sense of welcome.** Depending on your role, you might greet fellow students in a peer counseling office, in another College office, in a dining hall or at study break or coffee chat, or in a casual moment of everyday life. Many people feel awkward about taking the initiative to say hello. For many of us, it can feel awkward to approach or engage with someone we don’t know or don’t know well. No one wants to intrude on another person’s privacy. Yet the role of a peer counselor, peer educator, peer fellow, or peer adviser in effect requires that one bear such awkwardness as we greet fellow students, acknowledge their presence, and express interest in who they are, how they are doing, and what’s on their minds.

2. **Be a positive presence by being an active listener.** Resist the urge to see your role only or mainly as that of a problem-solver. That is your role only in part. But not all concerns a student presents are necessarily experienced as problems, and even if the student does experience them as problems, they might not expect—or even want—you to solve them. 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 students to know themselves better. You keep them company while encouraging them to find their own voice and their own way. Students want to feel that they are respected as intelligent and capable adults. 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 acknowledges them as fellow human beings.

3. **A-B-C: Acknowledge and Be curious before Challenging.** As a rule of thumb, we are wise to acknowledge someone’s experience and to be curious to explore that experience in some detail before we try to challenge it by offering alternative perspectives. We need to first join someone at their 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 they are taking before we can presume to interest that person in considering possible 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 their 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 they will take yours. That would be manipulative and disrespectful. Take a look from their 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 aren’t so sure. . . .”
- “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 what you feel is a limited perspective:**
- “I wonder, 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.”
- “Could your ‘becoming less friendly’ possibly mean that you’re redefining what you want in a friendship?”
- “Does it have to be all or nothing?”
4. **Beware of offering reassurance (e.g., “I’m sure you’ll do fine”), normalization/generalization (e.g., “Most sophomores feel that way”), or identification/overidentification (e.g., “I went through the exact same thing”).** These efforts have their place, but, if offered too soon in a conversation, they tend 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 that I know just what you are going through and that I know just what you need to do”). 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 dead-end – a conversation. They also help to deepen a student’s own sense of connection – to self, to other/you, and to the experience of living and 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 or alone.

5. **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 their perspective and into some other one because we cannot bear to stay with them in their 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 manoeuvre 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. (Birtchnell, 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.]

   Sometimes the best thing we can offer is the willingness to simply acknowledge how painful and uncomfortable that person’s experience is and to keep them compassionate and respectful company in their pain or discomfort. Sometimes doing anything else runs the risk of leaving someone feeling that their experience has been discounted or dismissed.

6. **Attend to felt experience and feelings (but don’t feel you have to say the perfect thing).** Sometimes we get so focused on the content of what someone is saying that we don’t register or respond to what the person is meaning. Kiyo Morimoto, the second director of the Bureau of Study Counsel, once said to one of us, “Sheila, you’re so busy listening to people’s words that you’re not hearing what they’re saying.” As we listen to someone, it’s important to attend not just to that person’s words but to their experience and to respond not only to their question but to the concerns and questions behind their question.

   This sort of attunement or empathy is often conveyed by our naming someone’s feeling or experience: “What a let-down....” “It’s got you excited....” “How annoying.....” “It sounds like you feel misled.....” “It feels so unjust....” “So you’re left with some sense of hope....” “You’ve just been white-knuckling it.” “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 to know that another human being can recognize what we feel. In that moment of having our experience 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. 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?" (The ellipses in the examples two paragraphs up are intended to convey that tentativeness and receptivity to revision.) If we offer our sense of someone’s feelings with a willingness – even a desire – to be corrected in the service of better understanding their 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 regretful. It’s more that I feel so off track. Rather lost, actually.” In the process of the person’s naming more precisely their experience, both of us are brought nearer to the center, or core, of that person’s sense of truth. (Note that “giving words” to an experience which someone has not quite been able to name for themselves is different in intention and tone from “putting words in someone’s mouth” or “taking the words out of someone’s mouth.”)

7. Go easy on giving advice. When you do give advice – or even information – give it in a context. And ask how the advice or information 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 are apt to be experienced as unempathic or unhelpful. Unsolicited advice risks leaving someone feeling diminished, bored, or insulted. (If, however, you are an official adviser in a student’s life (e.g., a freshman or sophomore adviser), see #13 below about the importance of clarifying the role in which you are speaking.)

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. A colleague of ours reports that Boston psychiatrist Martha Stark observes that we must continually gauge when someone is seeking to understand versus when they are seeking to be understood. Even within the same conversation, someone might oscillate between seeking one and seeking the other.

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 student was hoping for.

Sometimes advice is best delivered with a light touch. Musings – e.g., “I was realizing the other day that I’ve never heard a student who took a leave of absence express regret about that decision – other than wishing they’d done it earlier”; “Getting our first B can be like getting the first dent in a new car – it can be upsetting, but it can also be liberating, almost a relief” – can sneak in beneath the radar of a person’s psychological defenses and (to mix metaphors) plant a seed of possibility that will sprout in another season.

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 don’t hear you asking for advice at this point – you sound clear that you don’t want to drop a course. I accept that. I just want to make sure that you know when the add/drop deadline and withdrawal deadline are so that, should you want to revisit that decision, you know what your constraints are. And I trust you know I’m happy to talk with you at any point about this choice or just about how things are going.”

- “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. I also learned recently that a black-out is, neurologically speaking, a form of a seizure, with some brain damage as a result.”

- “As you think about whether and how to try to fit in pre-med courses this year, I just want to make sure you know that many students who go to medical school fulfill some or all of their pre-med requirements after...
they graduate from college. I just learned from someone at OCS that some Harvard alums do all of their requirements post-bac and get into top-notch medical schools and go on to be great doctors.”

**Examples of asking how the information or 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?”
- “As you hear that information/advice, what occurs to you? What effect, if any, does that have on your sense of what you might want to do?”
- “And in asking that question, are you asking for something beyond information or advice – maybe asking what your responsibility is to your roommate and whether it’s okay not to make a heroic effort on their behalf?”

Don’t feel you have to know everything. It can be helpful for someone 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. In so doing, we also demonstrate our commitment to following through on that person’s behalf.

**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.”
- “Good question. In all honesty, I don’t know the answer to that. I’d like to check in with [someone, or name of a particular person] to see what they have to say. Let me look into that and get back to you.”
- “It might also be helpful to speak with a professional counselor about this. Is that something you’re considering? Would it be useful to talk about how to go about finding someone?”

We might also want to acknowledge the limited usefulness of even “useful” information and advice. William Graves Perry, Jr. the founding director of Harvard University’s Bureau of Study Counsel, used to say something to the effect that “When you’ve got smart people who know perfectly well what to do and they’re not doing it, you know you are in the presence of forces more powerful than intelligence or knowledge, and it’s time to get curious about those.” We can begin to be curious about those other forces – which typically include beliefs, assumptions, feelings, needs, desires, and loyalties:

**Examples of acknowledging the limited usefulness of even the best advice:**

- “Having suggested these various strategies, I’m aware that changing what we do is not that simple. I mean, you’re presumably smart, and 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.”
- “So even though it’s ostensibly good advice, something keeps you from following that. Do you have any sense of what that is?”

8. **When expressing concern to someone, use “I” language rather than “You” language.** 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, and they can feel a sense of shame. When we talk with a student about whom we’re concerned, we want to take care not to unnecessarily accentuate a sense of shame or inadvertently leave that person feeling that we are looking down on them and regarding that them with pity or judgment.

When you talk with students directly – as well as when you advise students 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 them 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.”
• “I can tell you aren’t taking this seriously.”

[Note: “You” statements can be appropriate and useful when they express basic rights (e.g., “You have right to learn from your own experience”; “You deserve better”; “You have right to your own life”; “You need not abandon yourself”) or when they express specifically referenced statements of fact (e.g., “Actually, you are drinking more than the average Harvard student”; “Actually, on that little sleep, you are apt to be compromised”).

Examples of “I” statements:
• “I heard you say that your friends are telling you you’ve seemed a bit subdued or maybe distracted these last few weeks. How are you?”
• “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’m sitting here feeling hesitant to say this for fear of intruding, but I want to let you know how concerned I am about you. Given what you’re describing – you say you’ve been withdrawing from people, you said your grades are slipping, and you’re finding that others are saying you just don’t seem like yourself – I am concerned. And I’m wondering if you are as well.”
• “I’ve been thinking about something you said earlier in our conversation. It really struck me. When you said you just feel like you’re not on the same planet as other people, can you say more about you mean?”

9. 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 their difficulty or disorder in the way we would hope they would, or treats themselves 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 professionals and booklets and handouts and other resources. We might stand by someone as they place a call to make an appointment; we might make the call or write an introductory email on their behalf; 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 exuberance of a toddler’s emphatic "No!" the self’s determination to be included and respected in the making of choices. And of course when a student is an imminent threat to the life or safety of self or other, we need to take responsibility for involving the people and resources necessary to help keep the student and others safe in the near term.)

What we do have power over – and what we can take responsibility 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.

10. Allow yourself to bear the feeling of helplessness. Aim to serve, not “help.” We might work with the mistaken belief that there is always a right thing to do with someone who has a particular difficulty 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 or do things some other way. Our helplessness is not necessarily 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 or do 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 understand 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 nonjudgmentally 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.

11. **Consider how you yourself would want to be treated if you were the one seeking consultation or advice from someone.** 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 counselor/educator/fellow/or adviser.

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 their well-being or behavior (e.g., about their procrastination, obsessiveness, work habits, eating habits, drinking habits, under- or oversleeping, exercising too much or too little). Would they prefer to be approached by one person or by several? In what setting? How would they want people to broach the topic? What could make this difficult situation more or less bearable? How would they want the concerned friend(s) to treat them after this conversation? Putting oneself in the shoes of the person of concern can help us to appreciate that person’s experience.

12. **Communicate directly about your hopes and limitations.** Be explicit in letting fellow students know that you are not superhuman or endlessly available. In any given encounter, you can let a student know when you are reaching a limit of what you can offer (whether that’s a limit of time; or a limit of energy (e.g., your needing sleep or a break/breather to recharge and refocus); or a limit of safety (i.e., your needing to bring others into a conversation, such as in a situation where safety is an issue); or a limit of role (i.e., your needing to refer a student to someone in another role or with other expertise). Modeling that it’s okay to have limits, and that it’s essential to honor one’s boundaries, validates students’ limits, too. By setting our own limits, we signal that it’s okay to be human.

13. **Communicate directly about the role(s) in which you find yourself listening and responding.** You might also be direct about when you are speaking in various roles (and you might well speak from different roles within the same conversation): “As a fellow student and a fellow human being, I can appreciate your perspective that ______. At the same time, as someone who is here in this role as a peer counselor/educator/fellow/adviser, I need to let you know that ______.” Sometimes, you might be in the role of communicating information about an official limit or expectation on behalf of the College: “As far as I know, Harvard College doesn’t allow undergrads to take an incomplete in a course; you can sometimes get an official extension of time, but you’d need to talk with your dean about that and get official approval.” “Actually, Harvard has an amnesty policy so that students can bring their friends or themselves to the Health Services for medical care related to alcohol without getting into disciplinary trouble for drinking.”

14. **Refer students to others as needed, but let them know that you (or your organization/resource) are still there for them.** Sometimes you will want to make a referral to someone who can spend more time with a particular student 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 or make an email introduction of the student and a professional while the student is in your presence. In any event, make it clear to a student that by referring them to someone else you are not abandoning them. In fact, encourage the student to check back in with you, or let the student know to expect that you will check in with them just to hear how things went.

When you have referred a student to a professional, it’s usually clear to the student in a first meeting or two whether they click with the particular person. If a student reports back that the meeting just didn’t feel
right, or that the professional wasn’t on their wavelength, ask the student to describe what didn’t work. Let them know that it’s important to find a good fit and that it’s perfectly fine to try someone new or to return to the person they saw and talk over what might make for a more helpful approach. Ask the student if they can describe, by virtue of what didn’t feel right, what might work better (e.g., if the student felt the professional was too quiet, or not irreverent/playful enough, it might be worth meeting with someone who is more interactive or has a different sense of humor). Part of your role is to help people discern what does work for them. Once a student has articulated what they are looking for in a professional, feel free to ask a supervisor or fellow peer counselor/educator/adviser to recommend someone who might fit the bill.

Even once a student has found a good match, the process of change can be slow. It’s useful to anticipate that reality with students and also with those who are worried about them. The student might still hurt and struggle for some time to come.

In fact, people engaged in a process of change often feel worse before they feel better. Acknowledging a challenging or painful reality and a consequent need for change can be difficult in that it calls for some measure of humility and courage. And change itself can be unsettling and uncomfortable. We live in a culture that values swift solutions and that sees discomfort as something to be quickly alleviated or avoided altogether. But in the realm of human learning, growth, and development, we need to tolerate discomfort long enough to learn what it has to teach us, and we need to accept the reality of growing/learning developing/transforming pains. Even though change might take time, the hope is that a student can, in the context of a mental health counseling or academic counseling relationship, feel hope and support as they face what needs facing.

15. **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 at the Harvard University Health Services or the Bureau of Study Counsel (as appropriate, depending upon the nature and acuity of the concern for which you are seeking a consultation or referral).

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 other and to self; it is a means by which we take care of ourselves and one another in our community. Consulting with someone can help you to discern how to continue your connection with the students (depending upon the appropriateness of that, given your role) and 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 or privacy a student has requested or expected. Yet you might also 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. Hearing that perspective might allow you to feel more grounded and confident in a conversation with a fellow students.

**What developmental context might I hold in mind as I listen to and talk with fellow students?** As college students, you and your peers face many developmental challenges as young adults and young scholars. You are separating – geographically and psychologically – from your families of origin; you are defining your identities in new and competitive contexts; you are negotiating the world of social and sexual relationships. Having perhaps relied upon others’ interests, expectations, direction, and approval to motivate and guide you pursuits, you are now expected to discern your own sense of purpose and passion. You are challenged to make your own judgments about the material you study rather than to defer entirely to external authority. You are asked to appreciate and integrate various points of view and to reckon with more complexity – intellectually, socially, and personally – than you have encountered before. Even managing the sheer volume of work, while trying to live a satisfying social, extracurricular, and personal life, is a challenge for those of us who have approached matters with a sense of dutifulness or perfectionism: If one cannot do everything one would like to do as well as one would ideally like to do it, how does one decide what gives? How does one bear the feelings of disappointment, regret, and sorrow that accompany life’s limitations, failures, and losses and find the courage to take healthy risks in work, love, and play?