Being a Helper

When we live, work, play and study with other people, we often see their layers. On the surface, someone may be easy-going and seem to have a lot of friends. Yet, delving deeper, you may realize that he doesn’t feel close to many people and is having trouble figuring out who he really is. We are all like onions, full of multiple layers that, when peeled away, get closer to our real self. And during our time at college, issues often tend to come out.

As you discover fellow student’s layers, you may want to help them contend with issues that they’re facing. That’s a kind inclination – one that will sometimes be met with gratitude and other times with defensiveness. In order to have things go as smoothly as possible, here are some things to keep in mind when you’re bringing up a concern:

- Be compassionate and make sure the person knows that you’re talking with him because you really care.
- Assume a non-blaming tone – you don’t want to put anyone on the defensive in order for this to go well.
- Steer clear of ultimatums, threats or other pressure-filled tactics.
- Talk about why you’re concerned because this gives it a more personal flavor so the student can see how she is impacting others around her.
- Use “I” statements to express your concern, such as “I’ve noticed that you’re spending a lot of time alone and I’m just really worried about you.” The object of your concern is less likely to get defensive with that statement than the more accusing, “You’re withdrawing from us!”
- Listen well by tuning in, keeping an open posture and not interrupting.
- Also, listen actively by reflecting what she said back to her – that shows that you’re listening and really getting what she’s saying.
- Use prompts like “Why don’t you tell me more about…” or “What do you think about…”
- Don’t jump to conclusions or offer speedy solutions – if it were that easy, the person in question likely would have done something about it already! It’s not up to you to solve the issue; it’s more about listening and letting that person know that he is cared for so he can attack the problem using his own knowledge and strength.
- Include and validate the person’s opinion by asking her what she thinks could help in this situation.
• Don’t promise confidentiality because you may need to go to a trusted counselor, advisor or other support person in order to get your friend the best help you can. Being stuck in a promise of confidentiality doesn’t allow you to help most effectively.

• Keep in mind that you aren’t a trained counselor and that you shouldn’t take the weight of the world on your shoulders. If it’s too much for you to handle, remove yourself and refer the person to a counselor who can help most effectively. It’s the best thing you can do for the object of your concern – and yourself.

• Offer to walk over to the counseling or campus ministry or hall director’s office with that person. It’s another way to actively show support.


Know How to Help

• Talk less and focus on listening

• People need repetition – this lets the information sink in and become real

• Moderate your eye contact – sometimes constant, direct eye contact can be overwhelming

• Keep reasonable space between you and the person

• Avoid using I, We, They…focus on “You”

• Stimulate talking with repeating and agreeing

• Avoid reassurances and promises

• Expect and allow all emotions

Source: “Dealing with Student Death: Preparing for the Unthinkable” webinar with Ryan Lombardi and Dr. Brian Van Brunt, 10/13/09, PaperClip Communications