

A LINE ON LIFE

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Being a Helpful Listener *

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At one time or another, everyone has been asked to listen to the problems of a troubled friend. Most of these troubled people can be helped effectively by any caring, emotionally stable, and empathizing person. If you are that person, how can you best give that support?

Carl Rogers and other psychologists agree that there are at least two essential conditions for helping others to make constructive changes in their lives. One is an **unconditional acceptance** of the troubled person, an unshakable personal regard for that person as a human being. The second is **empathy** — the ability to share feelings. You need to communicate to the person that you have some understanding of the discomfort they are feeling. Because empathy and true caring cannot be faked, your support in times of crisis can be more valuable than anything the best-trained professional can offer. The essence of empathy is summarized by this statement.

"The way to really help someone is not to help him do anything but become more aware of his own experience — his feelings, his actions, his fantasies -- and insist that he explore his own experience more deeply and take responsibility for it, no matter what the experience is."

**People are more willing to share their feelings,
if they are not afraid of being judged.**

If you are not sure of how to go about this, here are some suggestions.

Rather than giving advice, focus on feelings. It is not unreasonable to give advice when you are asked for it. However, unsolicited advice usually makes the other person defensive. Passing judgment by giving advice will keep others from expressing their feelings to you. For example, a friend tells you that he has failed a test in school. If you indicate that more study time will help him with his grades, he will probably just get defensive and hostile. You can accomplish much more by saying something like, "*You must feel very frustrated,*" or simply, "*How do you feel about it?*"

Actively listen. Listening is an art that can be learned. People often talk at each other without really listening. People with problems need to feel they are being heard. Make a sincere effort to listen and understand. Let them know you are listening by eye contact, posture, your tone of voice, and your replies. Get rid of distractions, especially the TV.

Reflect thoughts and feelings. One of the most productive things you can do when listening is to give feedback by simply restating what was said. This indicates that you were listening and are encouraging the person to express his feelings further. Here is an example.

Friend: *"My parents are hassling me about my grades again."*

You: *"You're feeling pressured by your parents?"*

Friend: *"Yeah, damn."*

You: *"It must make you angry to be pressured by them."*

Try it. If nothing else, you'll develop a reputation as a fantastic conversationalist!

In reflecting thoughts and feelings, remember that feelings are also expressed nonverbally by facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, and movements. Don't limit yourself to merely giving feedback to their words. You might say, *"From the way you're standing there, it seems like you feel angry."*

Accept the person's point of view. Since you are dealing with the other person's feelings, it helps to accept their values. Resist the temptation to contradict the person with your point of view. Since we each live in different psychological worlds, there is no "correct" view of a life situation. If a person feels that his point of view is understood, he will feel freer to examine it objectively and even to question his perspective.

Avoid "mind-reading." In trying to accept the other person's point of view, don't assume that you know what they are thinking. Don't try to read their mind. Instead of telling people how they feel or think, ask them.

Maintain confidentiality. If you fail to respect the privacy of someone who has confided in you, your efforts to help will be wasted. Not only will the person be upset at you, but he will hesitate to talk to anyone else, because he fears the same consequences. Put yourself in the person's place. Don't gossip about the private events you are privileged to hear.

Admit your limitations. If you are asked for specific advice, it is better to make the troubled person aware of all the various alternatives. This can include *"doing nothing"* — making no change in the present situation. However, if you can't think of any additional alternatives, it is okay to say, *"I wish I could help you, but I just don't know."* Even so, there is the possibility of referring him to someone who might know, even a professional.

These suggestions are *not* an invitation to play what I call *"junior psychologist."* You probably do not have the professional experience or expertise to deal with serious problems. However, each of us can provide two of the greatest mental health resources available at any cost — friendship and honest communication.

* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1992, pages 591-592.