

# **A Handbook for Peer Counselors**

by  
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*Some people strengthen society just by being the kind of people they are.* – John W. Gardner

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## **PEER COUNSELOR POLICIES, PROCEDURES AND GOALS - 1986-87**

You have been chosen to be peer counselors. This is a serious responsibility. You are now role models to your peers. You are granted certain rights and privileges not available to the average student, therefore, we expect more of you than the average student. No cuts. No F's. No breaches of confidentiality.

As a team, peer counselors are responsible for making contact with every freshman, sophomore, and new student. Additionally, you are required to respond to all referrals and walk-ins, as well as reach out (outreach) to kids who are in obvious trouble. You are also expected to establish and maintain contact with your assigned teachers.

Although you will usually be working one-on-one, think of yourselves as a team. Draw on each other's expertise and resources.

We will have weekly staff meetings every Friday lunch. Miss three staff meetings in any one quarter, and you can kiss off an A. Staff meetings are the only time where we can all be together.

Paperwork. Tedious but necessary. Acquire an appointment book or calendar and write down dates of staff meetings, field trips, trainings, tests, etc. Maintain a daily log sheet (as provided) to be turned in weekly — **do not identify clients** on the log sheet. Just account for your time and actions.

## THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF PEER COUNSELING

1. Be nonjudgmental. Your opinion could turn off your client. The idea is to create a safe environment where your client feels free to talk – about anything.
2. Be empathic. Let your client know you understand and you care. Be interested and supportive. Suppress your true feelings if you have to.
3. Listen! Listen! Listen! Active listening is the best and most essential counseling tool you have. Use restatements, paraphrases, and summarizations to let your clients know they've been heard.
4. Avoid questions. Bite your tongue before asking questions. Is this question really necessary? Do I need to know this? While questions have their place, interrogations put your client on the defensive and shut down real communication.
5. Deal with feelings first. Find the emotions behind the words. You can't deal with a client's problem (or even discover the real problem) until the emotions are cleared. This can be heavy. Hang in there.
6. Don't give advice. Get solutions, don't give them. Assist your clients in generating their own options and actions. It's okay to give information – just don't tell them what to do with it.
7. It's not your problem. Don't steal it. The purpose of peer counseling is to help clients learn to solve or cope with their own problems. Often clients just want to express their feelings in a safe environment. Let them.
8. Keep it confidential. Clients will tell you intensely personal things. Except as specified in your peer counseling contract, keep this information to yourself. Violating a confidence not only destroys your client's trust, it can ruin the entire peer counseling program.
9. Know your limits. Know when you must refer (life-threatening situations and child abuse/molestation) and when you should refer (severe psychological problems) clients to the appropriate, qualified professionals.
10. Be informed. People will be looking to you to know what's happening (including rumor control) and where to get help. Don't let them down.

## ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Active listening is the most powerful tool a peer counselor has. It is the absolute best way to get someone to talk to you. A good active listener can help people feel better about themselves, clarify their thoughts, and solve their problems. Many counseling situations never need to go beyond “mere” listening.

### LET'S GET PHYSICAL – BODY LANGUAGE

Eye contact (or lack of it), posture, gestures, voice inflection, and touching are all elements of nonverbal communication: body language.

Most body language is unconscious. If you learn to raise your awareness of body language to a conscious level, you not only learn to “read” people, better, you can use your own body language to help people feel more at ease with you.

Learn to hear with your eyes, and to talk with your mouth closed. Learn when to touch and when to back off. Learn to communicate nonverbally.

### SAY WHAT? – THE DELICATE ART OF QUESTIONING

Questions should be used sparingly and carefully in peer counseling. A barrage of questions will put your client on the defensive, sidetrack him/her from the real issue, and generally prove counterproductive.

Bite your tongue before asking a question. Do you really need to know the answer? Are you maybe just looking to sneak in your opinion, satisfy your curiosity, or give some advice (“Have you tried ...”)? Often, a patient silence, a non-verbal cue to continue talking or a short paraphrased statement is much more effective than a question. You will be amazed at what people tell you once you learn not to ask too many questions.

Of course, some questions are really necessary. Basically, there are two types of questions: open and closed.

Concentrate on mastering the open question, the “invitation to talk.” Open questions can't be answered in one or two words. Open questions are used to:

- Start conversations (“What did you do today?”)
- Get the client to elaborate and clarify an issue (“What does she do that makes you nervous?”)
- Encourage the client to problem-solve (“What do you think you could do about that?”)
- Explore the client's feelings (“What do you mean by freaked out?”).

Closed questions can be answered in a few words (yes, no, fine, maybe, etc.) and tend to block communication. If used appropriately, however, closed questions can elicit necessary information, slow down clients who are rambling, and confirm understandings and agreements.

## **SAYING THE SAME THING ANOTHER WAY – PARAPHRASING**

*I know you think you understood what I said, but what you think I said is not what I meant...*

Paraphrasing lets your client know you understand exactly (“Yeah, that’s what I meant!”) what s/he said and makes sure you really do understand what s/he said. Paraphrasing also gives your client objective feedback.

A paraphrase is a clear, concise summary of what a client has said. It should capture the essence and leave out the details – a stripped down version of his/her perceived problem.

A paraphrase should always be worded in such a way that the client feels free to correct you if you are wrong. (“Let me see if I’ve got this straight, [insert paraphrase] Is that right?”)

Paraphrasing verifies communication and facilitates empathy. Its goal is to clarify a client’s thoughts and feelings. A good paraphrase will often help your client understand him/herself better, thus allowing him/her to proceed with resolving the problem.

## **THE REAL THING – DEALING WITH FEELINGS**

This is the most essential part of listening. A client cannot begin to accept or solve a problem until s/he has dealt with the feelings around it.

Working with feelings is tricky and taxing, because many people (both counselors and clients) are not at ease with their feelings.

Furthermore, what a client says and what s/he feels are often two different things. Quite often, s/he really doesn’t know what s/he’s feeling.

There are four basic aspects of working with feelings: identification, definition, ownership, and dealing:

**Identification** – To find out what emotions are going on in a client, the first step is to ask. (“How do you feel about that?”) This doesn’t always work. You may have to paraphrase or reflect or confront feelings you hear behind the client’s words or see in his/her body language, (Trust your instincts.) Give objective feedback, try not to guess, and always give your client space to correct you if you’re wrong.

**Definition** – Once the feelings are identified, you must make sure you understand what each particular feeling means to your client. (Ask 10 people to define the feeling of “love,” and you’ll get 10 different definitions.) Again, it’s okay to ask. (“What does being shy mean to you?”)

**Ownership** – Even after emotions are identified and defined, some people don’t want to accept responsibility for their feelings. (“He makes me nervous.”) Gently encourage your client to own his/her feelings. (“I feel nervous around him.”) People have to accept ownership of their feelings in order to deal with them. Otherwise, they remain victims of their emotions.

**Dealing with feelings** – Some people are very open with their feelings. Others are extremely closed. Fear, embarrassment, confusion, cultural conditioning, lack of self-awareness are some of the more common reasons people shut out their emotions. These people can be difficult to work with because they often honestly don't know what they're feeling, and/or they are terrified of releasing their emotions. With these people, you need to create a supportive, nonjudgmental atmosphere where it is totally okay to explore and express feelings. (Sharing and self-revelation can help here).

Dealing with feelings can be tough on the peer counselor. Many clients are mad and sad, and when they finally get in touch with their feelings, they tend to cry or yell. It's extremely important to allow your client the freedom to express hostility or unhappiness, even if it makes you uncomfortable or frightened. (This does not mean you should ever jeopardize your personal safety. If it gets too heavy, get out and get help.)

The beauty of allowing your client to vent all these negative emotions is that s/he usually feels much better afterwards and gains a better perspective on his/her problem. Once the feelings are expressed, the client is able to get on with the business of dealing with reality effectively,

### **PUTTING IT IN A NUTSHELL – SUMMARIZATION**

As you come to the end of a session or if you are about to change a topic with a client, it is useful to summarize. This is sort of a super paraphrase with feelings attached.

The summary allows you and the client to make sure you both understand each other, clarifies the situation, puts it in perspective, and brings things to a natural conclusion or sets up a problem-solving session.

### **A TOUCH OF CLASS – LISTENING WITH STYLE**

Learning peer counseling skills, especially active listening, can be frustrating, embarrassing, and awkward at first. You'll get "stuck" a lot and will make mistakes.

This is okay. It's natural in any learning process. This is why we have trainings and why we emphasize role-playing and practicing so much. Counseling skills are often difficult to learn, and sometimes we must unlearn bad habits before we can use these new skills effectively.

When you get right down to it, listening is more of an art than a science. Although there are certain basic rules, how you choose to apply them is up to you.

Your goal should be to integrate your newly learned ability into your personal style. Practice active listening until it becomes a natural, unconscious part of how you relate to people. The idea is not to change who you are but to make yourself more real, more effective.

The ultimate touchstone of active listening is whether people trust you enough to talk to you, trust you enough to seek out you when they need help with their problems.

## **CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING**

Everybody has problems. This is a perfectly normal condition of life. It's when people fail to solve or cope with their problems successfully that they may need outside assistance. (Remember, though, some people don't want help even though you think they need it.)

Creative problem-solving is nothing more than a methodical yet imaginative approach to dealing with life's big and little difficulties. It is a skill anybody can learn and everybody should learn. It works.

There are six steps to problem-solving:

### **1. DEFINE THE PROBLEM**

You can't help someone solve a problem unless s/he — and you — know exactly what the problem is. In many cases, a client is too upset or confused to understand the problem.

Use active listening to discover the real problem (as opposed to the “presented” problem). As always, deal with your client's feelings first.

Use paraphrasing, restatement, and summarization to help your client get a handle on his/her problem. Don't force your definition on your client! Unless your client “owns” the problem, s/he won't have an investment in solving it.

Once you and the client agree on what the problem is (take as much time as you need), you can move to Step 2,

### **2. GENERATE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

This is the fun, creative part of problem-solving. The idea here is to generate a variety of alternatives.

Encourage your client to come up with both reasonable and far-out options — the stranger, the better. It is absolutely important at this stage that neither of you judge or evaluate the options. The idea here is to get your client unstuck, to break him/her out of a narrow-minded, tunnel-vision perspective on the problem.

Coming up with crazy options tends to lighten up your client, and it often leads to creative but realistic solutions that wouldn't have been thought of otherwise.

Try to get your client to come up with his/her own options — s/he is more likely to act on his/her own ideas. This doesn't mean you can't suggest various options, but if you do offer solutions, suggest the far-out ones first. Save the obvious, practical solutions for later in the hopes your client will come up with them him/herself.

Even if your client or you come up with a good solution early on, keep the option-generating process going for a while. This will serve to open up your client's creative potential and will reassure her/him later that all possible alternatives were explored.

Remember, the overall purpose of this process is to teach your client how to problem-solve independently. Otherwise, you'll end up with a dependent person who blames you for his/her failure when the problem doesn't get solved.

### **3. EVALUATE THE SOLUTIONS**

This is where you get down to it with your client. Go through the list (which you should have written down) and throw out any solutions which are impractical or which the client is unwilling to implement.

Often in this critical, evaluative process, new ideas will come up or modifications of old ideas will be suggested. This is okay. Include them in your list.; The idea, after all, is to come up with the best possible solution.

If your client rejects all options, consider the possibility s/he prefers to suffer rather than change. Some clients are out to “prove” their problem can't be solved. This is usually an indication they are either afraid or unwilling to change some basic aspect of how they deal with the world. This makes them good candidates for referral to professional counseling.

If, however, your client genuinely appears to be willing to try to solve his/her dilemma, go back to Step 2 and see if you can generate some more options.

Assuming your client “buys” one of the generated solutions, move on to Step 4. (Remember, don't try to force a solution on a client. Unless your client feels the option has some chance of success, s/he may unconsciously undermine the attempt to solve the problem — and blame you.)

### **4. CHOOSE A SOLUTION**

Quite often, during Step 3 one solution will stand out as obviously superior. This makes the rest of the process a cakewalk.

However, if no solution is obviously better than the others, or if several options seem viable, your client is going to have to make a decision. There are a number formal decision-making processes you can use to assist your client in deciding on a course of action. These range from a simple pros-and-cons list to rather complex options matrices with weighted values.

A formal decision-making process is not usually necessary; save it for complex problems and for clients who understand things better when they're written down. Generally, the most important thing to remember is that it's your client's decision, not yours.

### **5. PUT THE PLAN INTO ACTION**

Once a possible solution is generated, encourage your client to put it into action. It's a good idea to get your client to state clearly (or better yet, write it down) exactly what it is s/he intends to do about the problem and when.

Be enthusiastic about the plan (if you are). Give your client moral support that s/he can solve the problem. This increases your client's hopes — and chances — for success.

## **6. CHECK IT OUT**

Get a contract with your client to let you know how things worked out. You need the feedback in order to improve your skills as a peer counselor.

Besides, not all solutions work. Not all problems are resolved upon the first attack.

If your client's attempt to solve his/her problem fails, check it out with her/him. Find out if it was a failure in the attempt, or if it was just a solution that didn't work.

If the client botched the attempt, encourage him/her to try again without making the previous mistakes. Go over the plan in detail again.

If the solution simply didn't work, explore alternative options with your client.; This may necessitate going through the whole problem-solving process again, or it just may mean going to Plan B from the possible solutions list.

And then there's the simple reality that some problems can't be solved. In that case, you will have to help your client adjust to something s/he can't change — but make sure all the possible solutions have been considered and tried first.

If the problem can't be solved, manage it.

*God, grant me the serenity*

*To accept what I cannot change,*

*The courage to change what I can,*

*And the wisdom to know the difference.*

## **GUIDELINES FOR INITIAL CLIENT CONTACT**

Explain the peer counseling program to your first-time contacts., Reveal the advantages of the program, tell them things they don't know, share your own experiences as a former counselee.

During the initial orientation interview, establish a friendly, low-pressure contact. Don't assume a problem exists. Don't pry, be conversational. Use humor and share "inside" information. Use the client's name. Follow his/her lead or prompt gently. Create a sense of trust and identification – after all, you are one of them.

Get to know the person. Find out what s/he likes and dislikes about school in particular and life in general.

LISTEN! LISTEN! LISTEN! Look for subtle verbal and nonverbal cues. Pick up on them.

Observe the person. What does the body language tell you? – eye contact, posture, voice tone, hands? What's the client's attitude? – shy, bored, hostile, happy, confused?

Immediately after every interview (orientation, walk-in, referral, outreach or follow-up), fill out a contact form., Make this a habit.; Don't rely on your memory., You will have dozens of clients, and you may need this information later.

Otherwise, keep **client information confidential** except during staff meetings (and then, only if it's appropriate).

PEER COUNSELOR INTERVIEW LOG

DATE:

PEER COUNSELOR:

CLIENT:

AGE:

SEX:

REASON FOR CONTACT:

**(circle one — ORIENTATION/REFERRAL/OUTREACH/FOLLOW-UP/WALK-IN)**

COMMENTS/OBSERVATIONS:

ACTION TAKEN/RECOMMENDED:

DATE FOR FOLLOW-UP CONTACT:

**STAR THROWER**

by

Loren Eiseley

A young man was picking up objects off the beach and tossing them out into the sea.

A second man approached him, and saw that the objects were starfish. "Why in the world are you throwing starfish into the water?" he asked

"If the starfish are still on the beach when the tide goes out and the sun rises high in the sky, they will die," replied the young man.

"That's ridiculous. There are thousands of miles of beach and millions of starfish. You can't really believe that what you're doing could possibly make a difference!"

The young man picked up another starfish, paused thoughtfully, and remarked as he tossed it out into the waves, "It makes a difference to this one."