HELPING SKILLS

BASIC ADVISING SKILLS:
ESTABLISHING A CONSTRUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP

Establishing a constructive relationship with a person experiencing stress is essential for building an atmosphere of trust. Only in a trusting climate will another person be open to the support and assistance that you may have to offer. Although there are no hard and fast rules as to how to do this, you may find the following suggestions helpful. Remember, however, that everyone has an individual style of expressing empathy. The suggestions here are designed to support the interpersonal skills you may already have and to offer certain guidelines that may assist you in establishing a constructive relationship.

Suggestions for Building a Constructive Relationship

1. Extend a sincere, friendly greeting and make the person feel comfortable by offering a cup of coffee, arranging for privacy, etc.

2. Accept the person and his or her problem; begin where he or she is. Acceptance may be indicated by listening, verbal communication, facial expression, or gestures.

3. Refrain from prejudging or minimizing the person or his or her problems. Often prejudgment is indicated by such comments, as "You should not feel like that."

4. Avoid stereotyping people or their problems. EXAMPLE: “Men usually punch walls when they’re angry.” Knowing something about ways in which people are unique impacts communication and building relationships. These considerations include gender, culture, ethnicity, learning style, sexual orientation, etc.

5. Give the person your undivided attention. It is important to focus on his or her problem rather than on your own concerns. Also, avoid unnecessary distractions. EXAMPLE: By telling someone what you think they should do, you can shut down free expression and undermine the person's ability to direct the resolution of their own problems.

6. Encourage the person to describe the problem as he or she sees it. Sometimes you can help by asking pertinent questions.

7. Encourage the person to indicate what help he or she wishes to have from you and try to respond positively to that need.

Good advising goes beyond the basic concept of establishing a caring relationship: it requires concrete helping skills. The basic skills of communicating and listening are described in the following pages. It is essential that you be familiar with these skills in order to be effective as an advisor and helper.
COMMUNICATING: ADVISING SKILLS

There are a lot of ways of breaking down helping skills into lists, etc. One approach that you can really grasp and use is what Allen Ivey calls five micro advising skills. They are described below:

1. **ATTENDING BEHAVIOR:** Attending is one of the basic listening skills. It involves listening with your whole body/person, and getting across to the student that you are really listening and really with him/her at that moment.
   a. good eye contact
   b. observing and modeling body language
   c. verbal following

2. **OPEN INVITATION TO TALK AND MINIMAL ENCOURAGERS:** Using OPEN-ENDED and CLOSED-ENDED questions is a key skill. Your initial task as a helper is to stay out of the student's way so as to find out how the student sees his/her situation. OPEN questions allow this to happen.
   **EXAMPLE:**
   
   OPEN-ENDED: Could you tell me a little bit about your new roommate?; or
   What were your reactions to the Convo?; or
   How did you feel about that?

   CLOSED-ENDED: Do you like your new roommate?; or
   Are you feeling good about being at Carleton this fall?; or
   Wasn't that an awful movie?

Open-ended questions allow the student the opportunity to explore himself/herself with the support of the helper. They also allow the student to share as much or as little as he/she is comfortable with. Closed-ended questions often emphasize factual content as opposed to feelings and don’t allow you to find out much about what the student is experiencing since close-ended questions can usually be answered in a few words or with a yes or no.

Use **HOW** and **WHAT** QUESTIONS instead of **WHY** QUESTIONS as much as possible. WHY questions can often make the student feel defensive.

**MINIMAL ENCOURAGEMENT** such as head nods, RESTATEMENTS, and "uh-huhs" can help the student keep talking. Just don't overuse them.
3. **PARAPHRASING**: This is feeding back to the student in a clarified form what he/she has just said. This can also be seen as REFLECTING THE CONTENT of the student's message.

By carefully "tuning-in" to the verbal content of the student and then "giving back" the helper can facilitate self-exploration. This is acting the part of a verbal mirror that casts back an accurate, clarified image. Feedback is the ESSENCE of what the student has just said.

This is done by paying careful attention to the student's verbal statements.

**EXAMPLE:**
Student: Things sure are different here than they were at Podunk High! I just can't get into this scene.

Helper: It can be difficult to go to a new place where things are so different. (paraphrase)

Student: Yeah! I'm just another face in the crowd around here.

Helper: It sounds like you're seeing yourself as just one of many, and not a unique individual. (paraphrase)

4. **REFLECTION OF FEELING**: Responding to another's emotional experience.

By selective attention to the feeling or emotional aspects of the student's statements and body language the helper can facilitate deeper self-exploration. This skill really helps the student to get beneath the surface to deal with the real emotional issue.

DISTINGUISH between the CONTENT LEVEL of a message (see 3, above) and the FEELING LEVEL of a message.

This lies beyond the words. It is found primarily in the nonverbal cues as they appear in that context. Pay attention to facial expressions, posture, eye contact, pauses in speech, etc.

Reflection of feeling really involves empathetic understanding. Try to communicate "I can accurately sense the world as you are feeling and perceiving it."

**EXAMPLE:**
Student: I really wanted to get in on that softball game, but I didn't know who to ask. (Sigh) (Looking down, speech quiet and slow).

Helper: You're feeling kind of left out right now. (Reflection of feeling)

or

You're really feeling disappointed. (Reflection of feeling)
EXAMPLE:

Student:  I should be home working to help my Mother out instead of being here spending money on tuition. . . . But, I really do want to be a teacher, so I've got to go to college, don't I? (Speech strained, intense eye contact, hands clenched)

Helper:  You're really feeling torn between the two, aren't you? (Reflection of feeling) or You're feeling right in the middle of a big conflict right now. (Reflection of feeling)

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5.  **SUMMARIZATION**: This skill involves gathering together several thoughts (from a talk with a student) to facilitate a clearer understanding of the whole situation. Often at the end of a conversation with a student, or at the end of a discussion of a certain subject, it is helpful to summarize what has been discussed in a way that clarifies the issues to be dealt with. This sets the stage for decision-making and action.

EXAMPLE:

Helper: Let's see. . . sounds like you're concerned about being away from home for the first time, you miss your old friends and you're not sure how to approach the other students on your floor. We talked about some ways you could do that, for instance getting out of your room more or joining a group that interests you.

Portions of “Beyond Relationship: Communicating and Listening Skills” were adapted from Basic Attending Skills: An Introduction to Microcounseling (A. E. Ivey and N.B. Gluckstern, Microtraining Associates, Inc., Box 641, North Amherst, MA, 1974).
PROBLEM-SOLVING STRATEGIES

RAs are problem-solvers. Actually RAs are people who help others solve problems. As the primary resource-person in your house or on your floor/column, you will be consulted about a multitude of problems. In most cases, you help in important but indirect ways. Following are some tips for being a good helper to your residents.

When residents approach you with problems...

• Remember that your job is to help other people solve their own problems.

• Listen and observe carefully. Find out as much about the problem as you can.

• Be empathetic, but do not make the problem YOURS. You were probably sought out because you are perceived to be objective and able to offer some good ideas. Don’t blow your excellent skills by taking the problem as your own.

• Help your resident find all the possible alternatives, both realistic and unrealistic. One way to remedy a strained friendship, for example, is to transfer to Outahere University. While not realistic it is one alternative. This process can add some needed perspective and create a viable plan of action.

• Chew on the problem for a while, if you need to. Within the constraints of confidentiality, it never hurts to get another opinion from a peer staff member. Sometimes just sleeping on it can be beneficial to you and to the resident.

• Explore the pros and cons of different options with your resident. Some good questions for this are:
  
  - What is the best/worst thing about Plan B?
  - Which solution intuitively makes sense to you?
  - What do you WANT to do? Why?
  - If you listed the pros and cons of Plan W on a piece of paper, on which side would you have more written? (They may want to actually do this.)

• Help your resident hear what they have said to you. Paraphrasing and repeating what you hear can be instrumental in clarifying the issues that are important to your resident.

• Do not offer advice unless it is solicited. Helping the resident create ideas, clarify the problem and the options, and figure out what they want/need to do, is more valuable than any free advice you may have.
CONSULTING AND PRIVACY

The issue of consulting many times presents a conflict between respect of another’s privacy, the responsibility of the RA position, and the personal needs of the RA. In order to provide accurate information and appropriate support to residents, consultation with another is always beneficial and recommended. Generally, when addressing students personal concerns, receiving advice from another will improve the quality of support that you provide and improve your skills in handling problems.

Consulting

Consulting or talking about a resident and/or a resident’s concerns is appropriate and encouraged in the following circumstances:

1. The discussion with another person is for professional purposes only. Some appropriate reasons for consulting are:
   - to get ideas for dealing with a situation
   - to receive support
   - to obtain assistance with a decision
   - to make a referral
   - to avoid becoming over-involved or over-responsible for serious problems such as eating disorders, drug problems, depression, etc.
   - to share liability
   - to inform a fellow staff member about something involving their resident(s)

2. The resident has given permission for you to discuss or refer him/her in talking or consulting about a situation; however, sharing the resident’s name is necessary since Hall Directors, Wellness Center Staff, and other College personnel often have additional information about a student that may help provide better advice to you. It would not be unusual for other staff members to know that a student is having academic difficulty, a medical concern, or other personal issues they may not be able to share with you. By working together and consulting with each other, we can put all the information together to make an appropriate referral or provide each other with guidance and support.

Implementing: The Consulting Role

1. Never promise absolute privacy to anyone.
2. Consult with another only in a private place—not in Sayles Hill or in the dining halls.
3. Let residents know they can trust you and your judgment concerning their privacy, but that you also have a standard policy of consultation expected of you (which enables you to help them better).
4. Never share information if the purpose is for entertainment or gossip.
REFERRALS:
WHEN, TO WHOM, AND HOW

Most of us recognize the need for making referrals; however, many of us are uncertain as to how to do the job well. The basic procedures for referring students to other resources on and off campus follow:

When to Refer

1. When a student presents problems or requests for information which are beyond your level of competence/comfort, refer him/her.

2. When you feel that personality differences (which cannot be resolved) between you and the student will interfere with effective progress, refer him/her.

3. If the problem is personal and you know the student on other than an RA/student basis (friend, neighbor, etc.), refer him/her.

4. If a student is reluctant to discuss the problem with you for some reason, refer him/her.

5. If after a period of time, you do not believe your work (communication) with the student has been effective, refer him/her.

DON'T WAIT UNTIL IT IS TOO LATE FOR ANYONE TO HELP

To Whom to Refer

Contrary to popular belief, specialized staff and counselors think of referrals as indications of competencies rather than as inadequacies on the part of the person making the referral. Anyone able to identify situations needing specialized advising or counseling deserves commendation. In addition, referring students to the office appropriate to the problem demonstrates that you have their best interest at heart and broadens the network of resources available to them.

Knowledge of offices and agencies that can be of service to you and to your students is of prime importance. You will want to refer them to the office that will provide the best service. Please don’t depend on someone else to see to it that a particular student eventually gets to where you could have sent him/her originally. If you are not sure where to refer students, find out before you send the student so you can be assured that they will find help.

We’ll spend significant amounts of time in training making sure you’re familiar with the many resources available to you, your residents and fellow staff. Your Hall Director is a helpful resource when you are not sure what to do.
How to Refer

1. Refer the student to a **specific person** (whenever possible) rather than to an office in general. **Familiarity with the personnel** and the function of each office will help you determine the “right” person to select for each individual case.

   Keep in mind the **uniqueness of individuals** when you are making a referral. Factors such as cultural or family background, gender, and attitudes about “seeking help” may need to be discussed before an effective referral can be made.

2. If possible and appropriate, **assist the student in making an appointment** with a specific person at the office. This may tend to give an already over-anxious student some sense of security.

3. **Do not** transmit information about the student to the referral office in front of the student. This may give him/her the feeling that his/her particular problem is becoming known to everyone on campus. Always **secure the student’s permission** before relating information about him/her to the other campus offices.

4. Go over with the student **what to expect** once referred. Unrealistic expectations and lack of information are two primary reasons referrals can fail.

5. When students have returned from the referral, **do not pump them for information**. Generally, if you inquire as to whether or not they **kept their appointment**, students will **volunteer** whatever information is necessary to continue your working relationship.

6. The person making the referral (you) **cannot expect to know the details provided by the student to the other staff**. You can expect to receive advice on how to deal with the student in future relationships. If this advice is desired, ask!

7. **Do not expect immediate help for particular symptoms**. Changing basic attitudes and feelings, gaining academic skills or learning to handle everyday problems may be a process that moves slowly. Do not expect miracles to be performed on situations you refer.

8. Finally, **respect the individual**. The basic approach to all referrals is one of fundamental respect for individuals and the belief that it is best for them to **work out their problems in their own way**.
REPORTING SUSPECTED SEXUAL ASSAULT/SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Resident Assistants (RAs) are considered “private status.” This means if a student or other member of the College community discusses or reports a suspected violation of the Sexual Misconduct Policy with an RA, he/she is required to report the suspected violation to a “Confidential Source.” Only RAs, among student peer leaders, are granted the “private status” classification. Other peer leaders are considered “non-confidential sources.”

“Confidential Sources” include the professional staff members of the Wellness Center and the Office of the Chaplain. This means they are precluded by statute from revealing to anyone information shared in the course and scope of performing their duties.

RAs remain accountable to Hall Directors and therefore must inform Hall Directors of allegations of sexual misconduct without identifying who the people involved are in the suspected violation. Hall Directors are then required to confer with a confidential source to ensure proper handling of the issue.

CONSULTATIONS
The psychologists in the Wellness Center and the College Chaplain will provide confidential consultations for RAs. These consultations will assist RAs in providing appropriate support, advice and information to student victims of sexual assault/harassment. These staff members will also assist the RA in sorting through her/his own personal thoughts and feelings about the experience of providing support to victims. These staff members will not report these allegations of assault/harassment to Carleton officials or to the police, although they will explore with the RA the options available to the victim including filing a report if that seems appropriate.

LEGAL NOTE
The psychologists and the Chaplain are required by Minnesota state law to report allegations about the sexual abuse of a minor to the Northfield Police Department and/or Rice County authorities. The psychologists must also report allegations of inappropriate sexual behavior by a professional licensed by the State of Minnesota such as a psychologist, physician or nurse.

SCHEDULING APPOINTMENTS
RAs should call the Wellness Center or the Office of the Chaplain and request an urgent consultation appointment as well as contact their supervising Hall Director. Every effort will be made to schedule an appointment the same day or within 24 hours with either the Chaplain or a psychologist. Hall Directors are available at anytime to discuss matters of sexual assault/harassment with you.
MEDIATION SKILLS

Consulting with Residents

Nearly all roommate problems result from poor communication. You will almost certainly be asked for help with a roommate problem. In most instances, your job will be to help establish lines of communication that have been closed, if ever opened.

As with most issues, you will need to make a judgment call about strategy. Whether to talk to the involved roommates together or separately or both are decisions that will be dictated by each particular situation.

Share this information with roommates who are struggling:

1. Remind roommates that most people are not intentionally inconsiderate of others. Encourage the roommates to work out their difficulties with each other before involving friends or you.

2. Encourage roommates to clarify their objective in talking with their roommate. How would they feel if the roles were reversed?

3. Roommates should find an appropriate time to talk. They should never confront their roommate in front of others or as they’re rushing off to class.

4. Encourage roommates to listen as well as talk, to keep an open mind, and to remember that their roommate will probably view the situation differently.

5. Encourage roommates to talk about difficulties as soon as they develop. Letting things build up and then exploding is unfair and counterproductive.

6. Encourage roommates to stick to things the other person(s) can change. Behaviors can change, most personal characteristics (like moles) cannot.

7. Encourage roommates to revisit their roommate agreement, filled out at the beginning of the year, discuss issues and make any revisions to the agreement.

Your best tool, as always, is your judgment. Listen to what's going on, ask questions to clarify your understanding, be fair, and help roommates who are having difficulties to talk to each other.

Should residents be unable to resolve their problems, you may need to provide mediation for the conflict.
Mediation and Conflict: How to Manage Roommate Conflicts

Basic principles of conflict resolution:

- They must resolve the conflict *themselves*. You should not and probably cannot do so.
- Set a tone that indicates *conflict can be healthy* when managed correctly.
- Angry feelings don't mean the end of a relationship.
- Get the individuals involved to “face up” to the conflict. Unexpressed negative feelings fester. Unresolved feelings can foster schisms in roommates and the community.
- Each side of the conflict must understand the others' position thoroughly.
- Search for common ground in each position. It’s there! Look for a compromise as a start toward resolving the conflict.

Ask yourself, as an RA...

- How can I best mediate, facilitate?
- How do I feel about this conflict?
- Am I biased in this situation?
- If I’m biased, to whom should I refer this situation?
- Is there anyone else who could help me with this situation?
- What would be a “successful” outcome?
- How do I encourage people to discuss and compromise?
- How do I encourage assertive behavior?
- How do I model healthy conflict management in my life?
- Am I using my resources and referral base to learn more about conflict management?
Ground Rules for Mediation

Before any helping can occur, set up specific ground rules that the parties involved must follow in the process.

1. One person talks at a time and always in a respectful manner: no interruptions, no yelling, no insults.
2. Comments must be made about specific behaviors that can be changed.
3. Use "I" statements, not general "blame statements."
   **Correct: I am uncomfortable in the room when the stereo is so loud.
   **Incorrect: You're a jerk, turn down your stereo.
4. Each person will get a chance to be a listener as well as a speaker.
5. Each will talk to the other--NOT to the mediator.
6. Each person will be attentive to the other during this process (eye contact, body posture, reflecting statements and feelings).

Mediation Steps

*Using the six ground rules listed above, take roommates through these steps:*

1. **Problem recognition.** RA calls roommates X and Y into their room for a conference to urge a discussion of the conflicts.
2. **Problem definition.** RA listens alternately to both roommate’s stories, using frequent paraphrasing to achieve full understanding.
3. **Commitment.** RA asks both X and Y if they are willing to solve the problem.
4. **Highlighting pleasing and displeasing behaviors.** If both roommates agree to attempt to resolve their conflict, specific pleasing and displeasing behavioral data are obtained about each roommate from the other in each other’s presence. Pleasing and displeasing data must be observable. They must not be judgmental statements such as “X is sloppy,” but rather “X never washes his/her clothes.”
5. **Negotiation.** Roommates trade and negotiate specific behavior to satisfy the needs of each. For example, X will allow Y to borrow her tennis racket if it is returned immediately after using it.
6. **Contracting.** A contract is made using the specific likes and dislikes of each roommate. After X and Y come to an agreement, they co-sign a contract that will be posted conspicuously in their room.
7. **Follow-up.** New contracts are made weekly. Intervention by the RA is terminated as soon as possible.