

# **QC0063 - 9 Things You Can Do When People Come to You With a Problem**

Have you ever been in a situation where someone is bearing their soul to you and you've thought, "I don't know what to do or say here. I'm not a counselor!"?

If so, I think you'll find what follows helpful...

## **"I'M NOT A COUNSELOR**

From time to time, everyone will find themselves in the position of having a friend come to them for "counsel" regarding something they're going through.

It's easy to feel inadequate in these times. To feel like you don't know what to say and you don't have any answers. To find yourself saying, "I don't know if I'm qualified to help you with this. Maybe you should see a counselor."

But you don't have to run from these times. You don't have to immediately refer people to a professional counselor. You can be more of a help than you might think.

## **YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A COUNSELOR**

Granted, there are some problems that are best handled through professional counseling and even medication. Things like sexual abuse, addictions, personality disorders, eating disorders and debilitating depression or anxiety are best handled by a professional counselor.

But, you don't have to be a professional counselor to help most people talk through their struggles. And you don't have to fix things or have all the answers to help most people with their problems.

Sometimes, just being present to help a person talk things through can go a long way toward helping them. Just your presence and a few simple approaches can go a long way toward helping someone figure things out.

## **A FEW SIMPLE APPROACHES**

I want to give you a few simple approaches that you can use to help someone work through what might be bothering them. They are approaches that many counselors use, but they things that you can do also.

Here they are some approaches you can use to help people who turn to you for help. And just a note: the list is not exhaustive, they're in no particular order, and they're probably over-simplified. But it's a good list to get you started when people approach you for help.

### **1. Listen longer and deeper than feels natural.**

Often our listening is too short and too shallow. We listen just long enough to get the gist of things, and then we wade in with our thoughts and opinions.

But you need to listen long. Don't jump in when they stop talking. They're not finished! Sit in that uncomfortable silence. Give the person a chance to be quiet and think. This will allow them to open up even more and share more things than they would have otherwise.

And don't just listen to what they say. Listen to how they say it. Is there emotion behind their words? What is that emotion? What parts cause them to tear up or get angry? Where do they hesitate? Where does their voice trail off? What is their body language telling you?

As you can see, listening requires a lot of effort from both your ears and your eyes. But those that learn to listen well will become a treasured help to others.

### **2. Reflect back what you hear and see, rather than what you think.**

Often, our first response is to tell the person what we think or feel about what they've told us. But that should be more of our last response.

We should first reflect back to them what we've heard them say and the emotions we sense behind the words. This does two things...

1. It lets them know that we are truly listening to them, which helps to foster a trust and an ease.
2. It helps them hear themselves and process things further.

Sometimes, people just need to bounce things off of someone so they can hear the echo come back and process it.

### **3. Suspend judgement...for now.**

I know this is hard to do, because we're human and we automatically jump to conclusions, assign blame, and put things in categories as a way of thinking through things.

But make a mental decision right up front to suspend any judgement until you've listened deeply and completely to all of their story. And when you've done that and are ready to make a judgement, remind yourself that you're only getting one side of the story. You probably don't have a complete picture of what's going on yet.

Remember, this person has come to you for support, not judgement. Your judgement may make you feel accomplished and comfortable, but it doesn't help them with their issue.

Which leads to the next thing you need to do when someone comes to you with problems...

#### **4. Empathize as if it were you.**

One way to short circuit judgement is to imagine yourself in their shoes. How would you feel if you were in their position? Would you be afraid, frightened, embarrassed, angry, worried, depressed? What would be your worries and concerns?

This is more than just feeling for someone. It's feeling with them, And it goes a long way toward helping you connect with them and understand them.

#### **5. Be a friend, not a fixer.**

When people come to us with a burden or a problem, too often we jump into fix-it mode. "Have you tried this...?" I just read a great book that talks about this very thing." "Maybe you just need to do something different, take some time off, get on medicine, etc."

Often time, we're genuinely trying to help. We care about the person in front of us and we don't want to see them hurting. But sometimes we do this because we're uncomfortable with another person's pain, anger, fear, or grief.

Yet, jumping into fix-it mode can communicate the following:

- We're not really listening.
- We're over simplifying the issue.

- We think we know better than the other person.
- We're impatient.
- We don't really want to take the time to listen.

Many time, people don't need us to fix thing for them. They need us to listen to them so they can get things out in the open where they can work on it themselves.

Which leads us to the next thing we can do when people are hurting...

## **6.Point out strengths rather than weaknesses.**

It's so easy to point out where people mess up and make mistakes, but that's usually unnecessary. Most of us know where we've messed up. In fact we tend to rehearse our mistakes to a fault.

What people need more of is for someone to come along side them and show them their strengths and how they can best use those strengths in their situation.

This is not only encouraging, it's also empowering.

## **7.Put off giving advice as long as possible.**

Let's say a person has bared their soul to you. Tired and emotionally exhausted, they get to the end of their story and say, "What do you think I should do?"

What should you do?

My encouragement would be to look at the person and say something like, "I not really sure what you should do. What are your options?" Or, "Man, that's a tough one. What do you think?"

This may sound like a stalling tactic, but it's really an important move.

You see, if you give them a specific answer to what they should do and it fails, they can hold you responsible for the failure. And if you give them a specific answer and it works, you foster a dependence on you rather than self-reliance.

Remember, we said that you're to be a friend and not a fixer. So rather than give advice, give your presence and support and help them work through things themselves.

*Just a side note...this is not a technique to use when the person is talking about doing something drastic, like harming themselves or someone else. In those situations, you should help them take clear and definite action toward self-care.*

### **8.Wonder out loud rather than give advice.**

If you feel like you're being pushed and can't get out of offering advice, Then couch your words in uncertain speculation.

Try saying something like, "I don't know, but I wonder if something like \_\_\_\_\_ might be helpful." Or, "I wonder if this approach might work."

Sometimes, in my counseling office I will say something like, "You know, I'm guessing here so feel free to tell me if I'm wrong, but I'm wondering if this is the problem."

This is a one-down approach that puts you in the position of a fellow struggler in life and not an expert...which makes it easier for a person to connect with you and listen to you.

### **9.Be patient with people as they struggle and grow.**

Not only are people messy and complicate, we're also slow learners. It's hard for us to get past our fears, our uncertainties, and our ingrained mindsets.

People are not machines. They are more like plants. Seeds must be planted in the soil of their difficulty. Those seeds must be given time to unearth and grow. And then the person needs to be nurtured and cared for before they grow and thrive in and through the difficult.

So be patient with people. Some will figure things out quickly, while others will be slower. But your job is not to force growth. It's just to provide the best environment for them to grow.

There they are...9 things you can do when people come to with a problem.

## **A FINAL WORD...**

There's certainly a place for trained counselors when it comes to helping people with difficult issues. I spent years in grad school learning the theories and the skills needed to help people with difficulties that are impairing their life.

But never underestimate your ability, as a trusted friend, to compassionately listen to and walk with someone as they give voice and effort to their struggles.

A caring presence, along with a listening ear, can be more therapeutic than you realize.