

Blog Post  
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The beginning of a new year is a good time to talk about how we can welcome big changes together, because that is where we will be – together. All of us stand together on the edge of a new year. It is almost like looking over the edge of a mountain. And there are a lot of us standing there.

But how, exactly do we help each other through large life changes?

People who want to know about San Francisco Suicide Prevention often ask what we SAY to someone who is in extreme pain or crisis to help them through this moment in time. We explain that we don't SAY anything. We LISTEN.

Listening is an exquisite art that needs to be developed. Done well, it enables another person to discover who they are, who they can be and how they can heal. We are the people of the ear. We know that hearing heals. We actually have a technology of listening. Here is what we teach at Suicide Prevention.

Listening means absorbing instead of taking charge. Sometimes the very act of not giving the obvious advice can make little beads of blood pop out on your forehead. Instead, you let the person know that you really want to hear what is happening.

You can validate that it is really a concern. You can also respond by reflecting what you have heard without passing any judgement on it. Just repeating enough to let the speaker know the ideas come through: Or by helping someone attach a name to the emotion they are feeling (like the movie “Inside Out.”) you are giving them more power over it.

Most people respond to really skilled listening by coming up with their own realizations and plans of action. And if you think back to a really catastrophic moment in your own life and list in your mind the people you trusted with information about it and the people you would never have trusted at all, you will usually see that the ones who did not give you advice were the ones in whom you confided.

How can we know that we are in the presence of someone to whom we should listen? There are four people who tell us they need us differently.

One person bluntly says, “I am in so much trouble.” She may have said this many times before and so people often start ignoring her. But she always means what she says and she always needs us to stop and listen.

A second person is not certain that he is worthy of help but will leave that decision up to the universe. He hints that he is in trouble very indirectly, but never really asks for help. You, yourself, need to start the conversation by saying three things: you have noticed something he said, you are worried because you care, and you want to help.

He has a cousin who is also uncertain she is worthy, but instead of hinting, acts this out by behaving in ways that ask for help. She may stop appearing where she is expected, give away belongings or pets, neglect her appearance. And the fourth person takes unusual risks that may even be life-threatening. He may become involved in unsafe substance use, driving, sex or violence. Again, you will need to start the conversation.

Each of us when we are in trouble is also very important. Not only important in ourselves but capable of engaging the importance in everyone around us when they notice and hear us. And in doing this, we are also doing the work of helping each other through any change the world can throw at us.

And we need to make sure that we find someone who listens to US so that we remain strong.

The great sage, Yogi Berra, once observed, “It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future.” We may not know what will happen to each of us personally in the year to come, as we peer over the precipice of change, but we do know for certain that each of us will be needed by at least one other person and that we can be part of the miracle of healing, this web of holiness.

And so our hope for the new year full of changes is that we will all become endowed with the ability to know what is needed by each of us. And that we will listen for it. And that we will hear it. And that we will be one community.