

“Not Knowing”  
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Learning that you don't know the answer is hard for everyone, isn't it? OK. Let me speak for myself: it's hard for me. In high school I prided myself in always having the answer, whether it be in the classroom, on the cross-country team, or even my friends' love-life.

*It's 2009. In front of her locker, tears swelling up in her eyes, Lauren says to me:*

*“He won't look at me in physics, but we Facebook messaged all night.”*

*My mind was racing. Do not fear, Lowell. I had the solution:*

*“That sucks, but seriously you just gotta ignore him but look at him piercingly in physics class. And don't message him tonight. I promise your eyes will get him.”*

Let's be real. I had absolutely no idea what I was talking about. I wasn't trying to trick her; I just so wanted to be there for my friend, strategize solutions to her problems, and then help her execute them. I felt like I was a talented people person and I could read people.

With freshmen year of college came immense change, academic pressure and social stress. I plowed on, just as I had in high school, attempting to be the master of the quick fix for all my new friends.

This began to change my sophomore year, when I interviewed for ECHO. That stands for eating concerns hotline and outreach, one of the 6 peer counseling groups at Harvard. And our office is located right here in the basement of our dear Lowell Hhouse.

During the interview, I was asked to role-play a counseling interaction. I found myself listening to the interviewer's concerns and then quickly attempting to solve the issue at hand. It wasn't that that I felt like I knew the answers. Quite the contrary- I was overwhelmed and was just blurting out the first things that came to mind. I thought my role was to identify, diagnosis and engineer solutions.

Turns out, this was the horrifically wrong approach to peer counseling. The feedback after my first role-play was simple: don't be diagnostic. You don't have to know the answer.

“You don’t have to know the answer!” – That was a revolutionary statement for me. Thankfully, the second role-play of my interview went much better and I was accepted to ECHO. As I made it through my first 40-hour training, I began to realize something groundbreaking. Not only was I not supposed to have answers, but I don’t want to have them. It is beyond humbling to meet someone where they are and know that I actually have no idea where they are coming from and how they may be feeling. The role of the peer counselor is not the problem solver- instead it’s the listener, the sounding board, and the supporter in that moment.

Recently my roommate asked me what my love language was. After 2.5 years of ECHO my answer was easy- empathy. The classic buzzword we see everywhere, particularly these days. But maybe there’s a reason we see it so often. So what does it mean?

Well I looked it up. According to Google, which normally has the answers to most parts of my life, empathy is: the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

I push back on this—empathy is not necessarily the ability to understand another’s feelings, in fact it can be precisely the opposite. For me, the inability to understand another’s life story is why we need empathy most of all. Empathy is the ability to go to a dark place with someone, listen to them, truly hear them, accept them as they are and let your own feelings guide your ability to connect with them.

Empathy is the compliment to the humbling feeling of not knowing someone’s story. Trying to understand is equally as important as recognizing we never fully will. Yet rather than driving us apart or creating apathy, this gap in knowledge can invite us to empathize. Empathy can fill the abyss.

I leave you with something that’s been on my mind a lot lately. Copley Square 2 weeks ago. Protest against the immigration and refugee ban. One sign is burned in my memory: Empathy > Fear. I have never known and understood what it’s like to be barred from this country I call home. But I know that I empathize – which means I have more to learn, even as I let that inspire my actions.