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# 8 tools to make you a better teacher, school counselor, mentor, therapist, any type of youth worker, and even parent IMMEDIATELY!!!

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- 1. Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is the practice of being aware of your own experience with an attitude of non-reactivity. The more mindful you are, the better you'll be able to connect with, listen, and respond to youth. *(TIP: Practice mindfulness by taking 10 mindful breaths; whenever your mind wanders away from the breath, simply return your awareness to your breathing).*
- 2. Curiosity:** Teens often feel like adults aren't interested in their lives; that they just want to tell them what they can and can't do. Practice curiosity to let youth know you're actually interested in them. *(TIP: Ask youth about their hobbies and how they best like to spend their time, the music they like, the movies they're into, etc. Become interested in youth culture).*
- 3. Empathy:** Many adults that work with teens are in dire need of empathy training. Adults often don't do a good job of taking teens' perspective, especially when it comes to youth issues like drugs, sex, etc. Practicing empathy will help you stand in the shoes of the youth you work with. Teens will notice this and feel more drawn to you if you attempt to understand them, rather than judge them. *(TIP: Especially with youth you may feel tension with, take their perspective and "live it" momentarily—visualize what it's like to be him or her and hold strong to that view point—Do this with as many youth as necessary at least a few times a week).*
- 4. Compassion:** Closely related to empathy is compassion. Compassion is wanting to help youth by alleviating their suffering; stress, anxiety, depression, trauma, etc. When they know you want to help (from an authentic place and not just to get what you want), they will feel more connected to you, trust you more, and ultimately be more receptive to whatever it is you're offering. *(TIP: Pick a youth you work with whose struggling in some way. Visualize him or her and send him or her compassion. Disclose to them you want to help them when appropriate).*

**5. Active Listening:** Often adults are conditioned to be directive with youth. We tell them what to do, but rarely listen. When we listen, we offer an emotionally corrective experience: one in which they are heard on the rare occasion by an adult and can be fully witnessed, listened to, understood. Practice active listening and youth will trust you more and be receptive to what you're offering. *(TIP: While listening to a youth, use mindfulness to keep your awareness in the present moment, curiosity to keep your intention authentic, and body language (eye contact, body posture) to let the youth know you are listening undividedly).*

**6. Self-Disclosure:** Skillful self-disclosure is the practice of revealing personal information for the specific sake of relationship building. Youth need to know that we are human beings with preferences, opinions, experiences, in order to connect with us. It's imperative that we don't over disclose or disclose anything inappropriate, but don't be afraid to show up and be yourself. *(TIP: Fold a piece of paper in half. In one half write, "information I'm comfortable disclosing," on the other half write "information I'm not comfortable disclosing." Write down opinions, life experiences, etc. Doing this ahead of time will help you to not be caught off guard when youth ask you about yourself).*

**7. Tracking Skills:** Tracking skills are the ability to recognize emotional tone. We do this often by recognizing body language, facial expressions, etc. When we practice tracking emotion via body language, we can better attune to youth, which contributes to stronger relationships. *(TIP: Notice the body language and especially facial expressions of the youth you work with as they talk to you. Try not to assume what they're feeling, but rather become curious about their body language as a window to investigate further: "I notice your brow is scrunched up right now, what are you feeling?")*

**8. Healthy Boundary Setting:** Don't be a pushover with youth, especially if you're trying to build an authentic relationship. I'm not saying you should be punitive and overly aggressive (please don't do that!), I'm saying it's unhealthy to not set boundaries with youth when they're tested. That will ultimately take away from the potential of a youth to view you as a caring, safe, trustworthy adult relationship. *(TIP: Write out the necessary and healthy boundaries that apply to your specific setting with youth (i.e., "classroom," or "counseling"). Knowing these ahead of time will help you to collect your thoughts on how to approach youth and set boundaries when they're tested, leading you to be less demanding and relaxed).*

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