



**Academy of Excellence in Teaching and Learning
University of Maryland**

2016 Student Essay Contest

Have you had learning experiences at the University of Maryland that were memorable and meaningful, as well as challenging, inspirational, and creative? If so, we would like to hear from you about them. In an essay of no more than 1,000 words sharing the learning experience that you had.

2st place award

Shira Movsas

“The Sound of Silence”

Shira Movsas

When I was younger, I had a basic misconception regarding what it truly means to help others. I would always impose my advice and opinions on my friends by telling them what I would do based on my own personal experiences. While this was helpful for some people, it was not until I joined the Help Center Hotline on UMD’s campus that I realized I needed to reconsider my approach. The UMD Help Center is a peer counseling and crisis intervention hotline. My friends would always tell me I give others good advice, and I truly enjoy helping others. When I heard about this exciting opportunity, I signed up right away. This turned out to be one of my most meaningful college experiences that transformed my attitude regarding how I help others and approach life in general.

One of the biggest values I learned from the Help Center is to listen. **Just listen.** It seems like a simple concept, but it is astounding how many of us do not know how to simply listen. This means not cutting someone off and not interjecting with your own values or opinions. Silence is not only OK, but often critical and therapeutic. When I first had “role calls” for practice, I would try to analyze the person calling the Help Center hotline, determine what I would do in his situation, and, of course, advise him to do precisely the same. I was shocked when my mentor told me to refrain from providing my advice. To me, the solution was so simple, why would I withhold “the” answer?

Instead, I was instructed to listen carefully to the person. What? I already heard everything and even developed a solution for his troubling situation. “No,” my mentor said, refusing to allow me to simply impose my “wisdom” on a potential caller. At first, I was really frustrated. It took a few weeks for me to truly listen to and empathize with the caller by reflecting carefully on what he said to me without simply interjecting. Soon, my

ears started to open and I understood the world differently. We live in a society where it is so tempting to offer a “quick fix” to any issue that arises. Our society is so focused on immediate gratification that when we see someone struggle, we think it is best to give him an answer right away. After my mindset was transformed, I realized how this could be detrimental to helping someone. Rather, the greater value in helping someone is to help someone help himself. Once an individual realizes that even though he faces a struggle, he can combat that problem with resources that exist deep within him, he will gain the necessary confidence to face such a challenge again and overcome it.

After this life-changing experience, I completely changed how I would listen to a friend expressing his problems to me. I used to feel uncomfortable by silences and would fill them by responding immediately. Instead, I now challenged myself to allow there to be 15 seconds of silence before I responded and the whole interaction became transformed. Those few seconds allowed my friend to collect his thoughts and to feel more comfortable. Those few seconds showed him that I wanted to hear his concerns and that I was there to empathize. Those few seconds allowed my friend to recognize how he actually felt and how he could respond to the situation on his own. It was in those few seconds of a simple “sound of silence” that we made more eye contact and that we understood each other better.

This experience taught me much more than being a good listener. It was helped me overcome personal hardships. I used to avoid internal conflicts I had because I would just want to run to someone else for advice to help reduce my anxiety. I realized now that it is therapeutic to have those moments of internal struggle. I understood that someone else simply handing me an answer was not the most helpful approach. Instead, I needed to work through these internal issues on my own rather than looking for a “quick fix”. Many times our struggles last longer than a “few seconds”; they could endure for days, weeks, or even years. But I now appreciated that life is full of struggles.

I used to view life as transitioning from one challenge to the next. First it's getting through high school, then studying for the SAT, then getting into college and so on. Now I view life as multiple opportunities to challenge ourselves to flourish in our unique settings.

My fresh outlook on life is to recognize that it is normal to struggle. Sometimes we may receive poor grades on tests, break up with friends, or feel isolated... but those are the moments when it is all right to not have the answers. We need to empower ourselves to take advantage of the "sounds of silence" and really reflect on who we are and where we are going. Everything in life is a learning experience and it is not our place to impose our biases on other people. A most valuable lesson I learned from the UMD Help Center Hotline is that life can be challenging, but the struggle itself is an incredible opportunity for inner growth and strength. While we should be ready to help others on their terms, we need to provide them the space to experience life so they can flourish by developing their own inner resources. As Maimonides, a medieval philosopher, wisely said, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."