

MY VIEW



Founder Wayne Fortin



RESPECT

My mental health career began in the locked ward of a State Mental Hospital 50 years ago. Think of the conditions depicted in the movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but worse. When I arrived for my first day on the job, I was given a hose. I soon realized I was part of a team which gave weekly "cleaning" to patients most of whom were catatonic and drugged. These patients were wheeled naked into the shower room tied to their wheelchairs. My instructions were to "hose them down" before and after someone else applied soap. One after another the patients would enter the shower room and I would use the hose to spray water on them. Occasionally patients would awake from their stupor to complain that the water was too cold or too hot. That didn't slow down the "cleaning day" assembly line.

A few months into this job I started noticing changes in myself. I was becoming numb to what was happening around me. Nothing seemed to phase me. I was also becoming cynical about others and about my chosen career. Most troubling was my attitude at work. I realized that I was beginning to dislike the patients I was supposedly there to help. I became impatient with them. I didn't taunt them with my hose as the more senior staff did, but I was getting close.

Fortunately, I quit this job before it permanently changed me. Looking back, I value my time on the locked ward because it taught me two things about myself early on... First, I learned how quickly and easily I could become a person who dehumanizes others and becomes indifferent to their plight. Second, I realized I didn't want to be the person I was becoming... mean, calloused, cynical... exactly the opposite of the helper I wanted to be.

I continued my mental health career trying to help those who in many cases were on the margins of society... the homeless, the drug addicted, the impoverished and the mentally ill. Fortunately, my early experience at the state mental hospital served as a constant reminder not to dehumanize those I was committed to helping. I've had my ups and down in my career, but fortunately I have managed to maintain respect for my clients.

Those crisis responders (police officers, firefighters, chaplains, social workers, nurses, doctors...) who work with people in crisis and see people in pain every day are at high risk of becoming what I was becoming at the state hospital... cynical, calloused and angry. They are at risk of becoming alienated from the very people they want to help. And they are at risk of no longer seeing their clients as

individuals but as “those people” who are defined by their diagnosis, their appearance or their circumstance. In short, they are at risk of losing the passion to help others that brought them to their profession in the first place.

I am very gratified that given the challenges of the job, I have found that most crisis responders do not lose their empathetic connection to those they serve, even after long careers on the front lines. They respect everyone they are called to assist.

How do they do it? How do these crisis responders maintain respect for all of those who need them regardless of the circumstances?

I have found that what these “respectful crisis responders” all have in common is this: They treat everyone they encounter as unique human beings. They don’t stereotype. They assume that below the surface everyone is a valuable human being who has many redeeming qualities. Here are examples...

- **Paramedic:** *“I only see 1% of the person I’m dealing with...the tip of the iceberg. So, who am I to pass judgment on anyone?”*
- **Police Officer:** *“Below the pain - in- the neck individuals I deal with there is a family, a history, and strength.”*
- **Police Chief:** *“I am much more than someone in blue uniform, and those I serve are much more than members of a particular racial or religious group in the community.”*
- **Nurse:** *“There is beauty in everyone. I just need to find it.”*
- **Fire Captain:** *“I try to find the best in people when they are at their worst.”*

The crisis responders who respect others have told me that maintaining a respectful attitude doesn’t always come easily. They need to work at it. They develop and nurture their respect for others by practicing specific respectful behaviors and cultivating specific respectful attitudes.

My hope is that those of us in the crisis response business will identify these valuable “how to maintain respect” strategies utilized by many and encourage their use by all.