



CHAPTER ONE

When You Need a Friend



Please, Don't Ask Me How I Am, Unless . . .

Beginning a healing conversation



HOW ARE YOU?

We ask that question all the time. It's usually a polite little greeting, just another way of saying hello. But we may not realize that this innocent-sounding greeting can cause stress for people who are going through difficult times. In these instances, it's important for us to be aware that when we ask that question, we need to consider if we're really willing to hear whatever the answer might be.

I had an unforgettable conversation with a woman whose mother was very ill. Maria's father had died a few months earlier, and her mother was at the point in her illness where she had signed a living will and was refusing life support. Maria's brother didn't agree with this decision. Maria was spending her days holding her brother's hand and comforting her mother. In the midst of all this, people were asking her, "How are you?"

"What goes through your mind is this," Maria explained. "You really want to know how I am? I'll tell you how I am. I feel like I'm losing it most of the time! I want to scream at my brother, scream at the doctors. I feel sad and empty. I've got to deal with medical policies, insurance, hospital administrators, my family, my mom, and somewhere in there my so-called normal life. So tell me, just how do I answer this question? Do I tell you how I really am? Or do I do what most of us do and smile or grimace a little and sigh, 'Oh, I'm

fine, holding up.' Do I just keep the conversation flowing past any sticky points of emotional meltdown?"

Maria continued explaining how difficult it was for her to know what to say when people wanted to know how she was doing. "I know they mean well, but do you know what often happens? If I start to tell them how I really am, they interrupt and try to make me feel better by telling me their stories. Sometimes they want my sympathy for them. Sometimes they give me advice. Sometimes they try to take over and fix things. Sometimes they say, 'Oh,' and change the subject.

"What's hard is that I figure it's OK to say 'I'm fine' to the folks I don't really know, because I don't feel it would be fair to burden them with the truth. But with close friends, I'd like to be straight. Instead, sometimes I feel that it's my job to keep them from feeling too bad about what's happening with me. Most days, I say as little as possible and figure that no one really wants to know how I am. It would be too depressing, and they'd feel that they'd either have to walk away or try to fix things for me. All I really want is for people to listen to me. Not to fix. Not to advise. Not to tell me their stories yet. To be a harbor where I can bring my boat in and toss about and eventually settle down for a while."

Sometimes people want to talk and unload all the overwhelming, scary, frustrating stuff that's happening. Sometimes people would rather share a little silence with you. Other times it's nice for them to be able to say, "Right now I don't really want to talk about it—maybe later—but thanks for asking."

Struggling with "How are you?" can present an overwhelming number of choices of what to say and what not to say. It sounds like such a little thing, to avoid asking someone such an open-ended, all-encompassing question like "How are you?" To signal that you are open to hearing back from them something more than a weary "Fine," you can try "Do

you want to talk about anything that happened today?” Or “Is there anything I can do to support you after the day you’ve had today?” Or “I don’t know what to say right now, but I’d like you to know I care about you. Is there anything you want to talk about?”

People in difficult situations appreciate it when you don’t ask them to give you the big picture. That’s why asking them a question about how things are at this moment is easier than asking them how they are. Focusing in on the smaller picture enables them to tell you, “Well, at this moment, I’m OK; yesterday was rough, though.” Or they could respond by saying something as straightforward as “Right now I could use a nap and a neck rub.”

Another way to make an opening connection is to just let them know you care and that you aren’t seeking information at all. You can tell them: “You’ve been in my thoughts.” Or “I wish I were there to give you a hug, help you pack, take you where you need to go.” Or “I’ve been trying to think of a way to support you. Would this help . . . ?”

Once the conversation is open, you might wonder what to say next. Remember that conversation isn’t always a back-and-forth exchange, taking turns to talk and listen. It’s not just about you being quiet so that then you can say what you’ve been thinking about while the other person was talking. Healing conversations are about pausing to tune in to what others need or want to say and what, if anything, they are able to hear from you at that moment. Healing conversations also make room for comfortably sharing silence.

There’s another factor to consider when you want to take a healing conversation to the next level. Consider your relationship to the person. Sometimes the fact that you know each other well may make the person feel more comfortable in being blunt with you. Oddly enough, sometimes it will make the person feel too vulnerable. Don’t assume you know

which way someone else will feel. When you don't know someone well, you may actually be able to provide what is needed most: compassionate listening without judgment. If you are uncertain of how deep to get into a conversation with someone you don't know well, just pause and acknowledge, "I don't know you very well, but I'd like to do whatever I can to support you, even though I'm not sure what that would be. I'm willing to try." If you know the person well, you might take the conversation to the next level by reflecting what you sense your friend is feeling, not just what was said.

When people are having a rough time, usually the first question we ask them is "How are you?" because we think it's a way to open up the conversation and to show that we care. Here's another way to look at it: if you are trying to comfort people who are dealing with difficult situations, they will bless you for not making the "How are you?" question the first one. Ask about their work or their family or about almost anything else to give them a little relief from once again explaining what a rough time they are having getting through this trying experience. They want to be treated like whole individuals, not just as people in a challenging situation that is taking over their identity. Perhaps after listening carefully for a while, you may not even have to ask how they are because they will have told you in their own way.