

Are you OK? And then what do you say?

For some time now, we've been encouraged to check in with our friends about how they're dealing with the everyday ups and downs of life, by openly asking "Are you OK?"

This is a fairly easy conversation starter but for the question to be really effective, we need to know what to say when we get our friend's reply. What if they say:

"I'm actually really depressed about ..." OR "Things are really bad at home right now."

We need to know where to go to next with the conversation. Here are some tips for you:

- 01 When we ask someone how they're doing, we need to be open to any kind of answer – not just the one we're hoping to hear, such as "fine thanks". So if we are told "I'm really depressed", "unhappy", "lost", "overwhelmed", "can't get over it", where we often go wrong is we think we have to solve the problem or as I often say, "fix the grief". But that isn't what our friend actually expects. They just want to get their problems and their feelings off their chest
- 02 The purpose of asking "Are you OK?" is to let your friend know it's safe to talk to you and that you're genuinely concerned for them. So if you respond by saying:
"It can't be that bad." OR "You know what you should do ...", you're actually putting distance between yourself and your friend as your response shows you don't understand, you're not seeing the problem from their perspective – you've listened but you haven't actually heard the meaning of their words.
- 03 You need to respond with words that show you're on their wave length. This doesn't mean you're agreeing with what they say, it simply says, "I hear you and I accept that's how the world looks to you right now.". We call this empathy. It's a relationship builder, a connector of people. Empathy sounds like this:

"I can see why you've been out of sorts lately."

"That sounds really awful, no wonder you're so upset."

"It sounds like you're totally overwhelmed, you just didn't see this coming."

When you have a problem, it's a huge relief to talk to someone who understands, someone who "gets it", someone who doesn't change the subject because the topic has become too tough, too emotional. On the other hand, it's hugely disappointing and hurtful to talk to someone who tries to fix your problem with their easy-fix advice and ends up telling you how you should act, think, or feel and basically doesn't hear what you just said. It takes courage to tell someone your story and to say that you're not OK. Our role is to listen to that story, hear what matters most to our friend and respond in a way that shows we've heard their pain and how life is affecting them right now.



You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her to empty his heart. Even if he says things that are full of wrong perceptions, full of bitterness, you are still capable of continuing to listen with compassion. Because you know that listening like that, you give that person a chance to suffer less.

If you want to help him to correct his perception, you wait for another time. For now, you don't interrupt. You don't argue. If you do, he loses his chance. You just listen with compassion and help him to suffer less. One hour like that can bring transformation and healing - Thich Nhat Hanh

