
Thrive

Yeah Nah

What stops us checking in on a mate – and how to overcome it

by STEPHEN KEARNEY

The research is pretty clear—when someone is struggling, the support of another human being is one of the most helpful things.

Particularly if that other person is respected and trusted. In the harder moments of our own lives, it's often the company and compassion of someone we trust and respects that gets us through it. Unfortunately, stress can also lead us to pull away from others and this pulling away can become a vicious cycle. We feel stressed and alone, so pull away, then feel more stressed and alone. So, knowing that it can help, what stops us checking in on someone?

One of the reasons we can neglect or procrastinate checking in on someone is being busy ourselves. And who's not busy? The "Good Samaritan Study" is one of the landmark studies in psychology and provided insight into what influences compassionate behaviour. A number of Princeton University seminary students (priests in training) were asked to prepare and deliver a sermon on either being a minister or the Good Samaritan story in the Bible. When they arrived to give the sermon, they were told it was actually to be given at another venue, across campus. Some were told there was no hurry and the group would wait for them, others were told that they were late and should hurry. As the students crossed campus, another of the researchers pretended to be unconscious in a doorway. Those that were running late were far less likely to notice and offer help to the "injured", in fact some even stepped right over them! Sometimes they didn't notice them,

and sometimes they did but didn't act on it. So, making an effort to regularly slow down, disengage from your busyness, and take a moment to reflect on the people around you, can be some of the most useful things you can do.

Other barriers can be internal. We may hold an assumption or rule in our heads that triggers anxiety, and avoiding that anxiety leads us to postpone or suppress the act of checking in. So, don't use confidence or the absence of anxiety as a guide for whether you should check in. If you do, you may never get there. Instead, connect with your concern, use that as your guide, and take your anxiety with you into the conversation. Open your mouth and say, "How are you doing?", even if your heart is pounding fast with uncertainty as you say it...

Some other rules or assumptions that can get in the way include:

If I ask and they tell me, I'll have to fix it and I don't know how. There are two inaccuracies in this assumption. The first is that you have to fix it. Sitting with a mate in their distress creates space for them to get a different perspective on their problems and start solving them themselves. The second is that—and the evidence on this is compelling—just being with someone who is struggling is inherently helpful. Your mere presence whilst they have those emotions helps. So, know that sitting there, without judging or fixing, is enough. To quote a leader I once worked with: "Big ears, small lips." Also, remember that there are other resources you can guide them toward, once it gets to that, including your GP, EAP, and other friends and whānau.

If I ask and they get upset, it'll be embarrassing for both of us. Yep. That may well be. That's OK. It may also be that, once that has passed, you'll both feel glad you had the conversation because you were courageous enough to be real. And that's a habit that has a way of enriching our lives.

I'll ask when... (insert optimal conditions). There are definitely better conditions in which to check in on a mate – in private, with ample time, when they seem to be in a receptive mood and you have a close and trusting relationship. However, when life is busy, it can be really hard to find that optimal moment. This can result in never having the conversation. The evidence is that even a text can make a difference, or an expression of concern in a stolen moment at Friday drinks, perhaps with a commitment to catch up properly on Monday. So, rather than wait for the optimal conditions, ask yourself what are the minimal conditions in which you can show concern and make a connection.

If I ask, they'll think I think they aren't coping, and that will make their problems worse. This concern is valid and, sometimes, the more they respect you, the more likely this is. So, make it OK to be struggling. Start off your enquiry with a couple of the reasons life might be hard for them at the moment. These are unlikely to be hard to generate. You can draw on any shared experiences, such as being a working parent, working in a volatile industry or being in a new role. Your key message is, "It would make sense if you were struggling right now, and I'm not judging you for that."

They will give me the four-letter word starting with F.

You do your best to check in, and they give you the "I'm FINE" treatment. You have a couple of options at this point, the first is to press the issue and follow up with a bit of radical compassion - a version of, "No. Really. How're you tracking? Cos it looks like things are pretty tough." Your second option is to indicate that it would make sense if they were finding things hard at the moment, and so you are going to come back to it, e.g. "No worries. I know you have a lot of balls in the air at the moment though, so I'd like to check in again in a couple of days." This signals that you care enough not to be fobbed off, minimises any loss of face, and gives them time to get their head around their response. Of course, make sure you do actually check in.

So, if you have a twinge of concern about a mate, slow down, notice the reasons your mind is giving you not to check in and hold them lightly, take your anxiety with you into the conversation, and be prepared to just listen and try to understand. Remember that the expression of concern and compassion is the important ingredient. You don't have to get it perfect or smooth, and a well-intentioned, clumsy check-in can be helpful (sometimes even more helpful, as it makes it OK to be human), and will definitely be better than the perfect check-in that never happened.