

I don't know and it's perfectly OK

Being comfortable with "not knowing"

A two-part question:

When was the last time you were engaged with another person and said, openly and honestly, "I don't know" AND felt completely comfortable and at peace with "not knowing"?

Why we think we need to know

In life – at work, at home, at play and in relationship - we're expected to have certain capacities and competencies - "know-how." Others depend on our ability to have, be or do.

But, how do we react when facing a dilemma, a conundrum, a challenge or problem and we just "don't know"?

In Western culture we often feel the need to "save face" and so when we feel stumped we often conjure up the "appearance of knowing" so we can feel we're in control. In our culture, we overemphasize how much we know.

So, while we feel that "not knowing" is unacceptable, often we actually just don't know from time to time.

Defensiveness against "not knowing"

When we don't know, however, we move towards a knee-jerk reactivity to "defend" ourselves in some way, shape or form – jargon, double-speak, techno-babble and the like to mask our unknowing, espousing facade or fake image of knowing – resorting to facts or figures to cloud an issue, muddy already-murky waters, avoidance, feigning "exclusion" or seeking allies to support our not knowing, or blaming someone else to mask our discomfort, fear, insecurity and uncertainty. To be in control and protect our fragile egos.

Not knowing can actually be beneficial

In Eastern cultures, "not knowing" is often considered a self-supporting, personal-developmental practice that can actually bring one to be ever more effective in living life. Welcoming a conflict or problem with a sense of "not knowing" can be an opportunity for creativity and insight. The darkness of the unknown supports can us to access our inner strength, our inner wisdom and higher self. Asking positive (not-fear-based, reactive) questions from a place of curiosity can support us to overcome our fear, uncertainty and doubt and feelings of lack and deficiency.

Actually "not knowing," provides an opportunity to consciously slow down, "take a deep breath", delete our assumptions, misperceptions, misconceptions, misunderstandings, and expectations in order to "be" present in the moment, right here and right now, without the intensity, irritation and agitation to "get somewhere else," "to be right." "Not knowing" allows us to relax into our bodies and minds, focus on the foreground and the background, to "see beyond our eyes", to jettison "my knowledge" and be curious about what I don't know. "Not knowing" is all about curiosity, the adventure of "finding out" from a place of "Hmmm. That's interesting. I wonder what that's all about."

"Not knowing" is about "punctuation," - more question marks and fewer periods. It's about

being inquisitive not about ego, personality, blaming, judging and "being right." When we "don't know" we invite, we are open, we ask and observe, watch and listen. We slow down, give up our need to be "the expert." We "allow" life to unfold; we don't "make" life unfold.

Rather than defending against "not knowing, we can relax into "not knowing" as a part of who we are, knowing that it's a part of our everyday life and an opportunity to grow and learn something new about ourselves in the process.

So, two sets of questions:

Questions that evolve from a place of "not knowing:

- If there is a deeper reason for me/us to be here, what is it?
- What's important to me about this situation and why do I care?
- What's our/my intention here? What's the deeper purpose - the "big why" - that is worthy of our/my best effort?
- What stands in the way of each of us being fully present in this situation?
- What draws us together?
- How much does the first person who speaks set the tone for the ensuing conversation?
- Can we/I by-pass some of the trust issues that normally keep us/me from opening up and moving into deep conversations?
- Can we/I step into the unknown?
- To what degree might it be possible for me to see the world/issue/problem through your eyes?
- What am I hiding?
- Do I give myself permission to be fully myself?
- Does our "expertise" distract us from exploring the essence of the issue/question?
- How comfortable are we (am I) with not knowing?
- What would someone who had a very different set of beliefs than we/I do say about this situation?
- What is missing from the picture so far? What are we (am I) not seeing? Where do we need more clarity?
- What could happen that would enable you/us/me to feel fully engaged and energized in this situation?
- What's possible here and who cares about it?
- How can we support each other in taking the next steps? What unique contribution can we each make?

and

some questions for self-reflection:

- Is it OK, to "not know"?
- How do you feel when you "don't know?"
- What behavior(s) do you engage in when you "don't know?" Do you ever "pretend" you do know?
- Do you ever see "beyond your eyes"? (observe what's around you that you've never noticed before...crack in the ceiling, color/shapes of plants in the office, another's tone of voice, color of lights in the elevator, a client or friend's usual way of talking or their body-language, softness of the carpet in your office, others' email signatures, pictures in the taxi, etc..)?

- What in life are you curious about? Have you explored further?
- Do you resist "not knowing?"
- What is one upcoming opportunity where you can practice "not knowing?"
- What was always needing to "know" like for you and your family when you were growing up?

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