

On human relationships

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It is startling how little people actually talk to each other.

“How are you?”

“Good.” “Alright.” “Fine.”

We say it all the time, and chances are, we’re probably not fine.

We’re probably sad or happy or angry or laughing about *something*. We’ve probably got something on our minds that talking about might help. We may want other people to see through our “Fine” to the crushing sadness that lay beneath it, but, that actually isn’t their job.

It is not someone else’s job to decipher your emotions for you. (Unless they’re your therapist/they’ve willingly consented to.)

Sure, you may have friends who know when you’re really happy or sad no matter what you say. I can’t speak for all of those friends, but having been that friend time and time again, what I can say is: it’s kind of boring.

Don’t get me wrong, I love talking to people about their feelings. I love doing my best to help people in my life work through difficult emotions. It’s wading through the repeated parroting of, “I’m fine,” “I’m fine,” “Don’t worry about it,” again and again until the veneer cracks and the person says “*Aaaactually...*” That whole song and dance? It’s really, really dull. Just get to the real stuff.

So. How are you?

Most people who ask you “How are you?” don’t expect a real answer (especially in London, where even your friends don’t expect a real answer.)

But trying to guess what that person meant when they asked “How are you?” isn’t your responsibility. If they want a fake answer, they can say so. If they ask “How are you?” you are allowed to actually answer. You are allowed to answer however you choose. Because you are, in fact, *allowed to feel whatever it is you feel*.

“But what if they didn’t mean...” you might say.

Well, if you’re not sure what that person means, you can.... ASK!

Example: “*Hey, are you asking as a polite way of saying Hello, or do you want to know how I’m really doing?*”

“That’s weird,” you might say.

Um. Why? It's using direct communication to have a conversation without making assumptions about what everyone involved needs. Because you actually don't know what someone needs unless you ask and they answer honestly.

“Because that's not how most people interact!”

Most people? You mean the ones who accept your “fine” as all that's going on inside you, and don't bother to ask how you really are, and treat you like they don't care? Who'd rather have you buy them a drink at the pub than give you a hug when you're crying? The ones you've been able to share no joy with other than laughing at a YouTube video? The ones who can surround you with their physical presence but leave you feeling crushingly alone?

Those people, you mean?

Well, if you think most people have the right idea about how to interact, you are completely free to read no further.

...

Still reading?

Let's continue.

Why not just... ask?

If you want someone to talk to you, you never know if that person might be willing to talk to you until you *ask*. Even if they're your barista. Baristas have feelings too. They might need someone to talk to just as much as you do, and so many forced polite mini-interactions might be killing their soul as well (especially in London.)

“But what if...”

They don't want to talk to you?

Did you ask them?

Did they say No?

If they said No, respect that. If they said Yes, go with it. They may have done so out of a feeling of pressure, but *their feeling of pressure is not your responsibility*. Just like your desire to talk to them is not their responsibility. If they said Yes and you feel you haven't acted in a way to coerce them (e.g. holding a gun to their head and saying “JUST TALK TO ME”), you can go with their Yes.

If their answer changes, they can say so. If they start talking and realize they don't want to talk about this, they can say so. The same goes for you.

In the meantime, that person is responsible for their own feelings and actions, and you are responsible for yours. Someone else feeling pressured, awkward, or uncomfortable is none of your business. You feeling pressured, awkward, or uncomfortable is none of their business.

Them wanting to pressure you, make you feel awkward, or uncomfortable, is none of your business. You wanting to pressure them is none of their business.

You get what I'm saying? No one can make you feel anything without *you* letting them. At the end of the day, they didn't make you feel, *you* just feel. They just feel. What you feel, you are allowed to feel. It is your responsibility to deal with it however you see fit. No one else can feel it for you.

What everyone else feels, they are also allowed to feel. It is their responsibility to deal with it however they see fit. No one else can feel it for them.

So, if my feelings are my problem, and your feelings are your problem, how do we interact with each other?

Here's how:

1) Consent.

"Consent is sexy!" all those sex ed posters say. It's also the entire basis of human interaction.

Consent hinges on two things: honesty and communication.

We usually talk about consent in the context of sexual consent, but consent goes far beyond the realm of sex. Consent is crucial in conversation, emotional support, listening, spending time together, expectations, treatment of one another, rules of engagement. Consent can only be freely given if it is honestly communicated. Consent can be removed at any time, for any reason.

To consent to an experience, you communicate that consent in some form that is both understandable and understood. I do not believe that consent has to be a specific verbal 'yes.' It can be communicated through body language, tone, or action, however, a verbal 'yes' is one of the simplest ways of expressing consent, because it doesn't require others to make assumptions about one's meaning.

For consent to be given, it has to be honest. If it's coerced, pressured, a lie – it isn't really consent. (But again, your feeling of pressure is not really anyone else's problem. If you feel pressured to say Yes, and the only reason you say Yes is because of that pressure, maybe say No.)

For consent to be given, it has to be communicated. The communicator has to have agency in the communication, the receiver has to receive and understand that consent has been given.

All of this is pretty straightforward.

Consent is at the root of it all, whether it be a basic understanding of giving consent to a particular experience ("yes means yes"), or a more total understanding of not being obligated to any person in your life and *choosing* to have that person in your life. Would you rather have a friend who feels obligated to text you, or who really wants to?

No one is obligated to you, and you are obligated to no one. You choose your interactions. They choose theirs. You can remove consent to any experience at any time. You are not obligated to explain yourself. This also means that anyone else can do the same. There are no rules.

2) There are no rules (so don't assume you know them.)

The only rules that exist within a given human relationship are the rules that both parties have consented to, and even then, they're chosen interactions. They're not really rules.

If I believe that you being my partner means you have to text me every day, or pay for my meals, or be sexually monogamous with me, and that all of these things you will do simply on the basis of being my partner without asking you what the term means to you, you haven't consented to the relationship. I have made assumptions. I have determined what the rules are for you without you ever consenting to follow them, or ever asking if your rules are different.

Not believing in labels on a relationship is so often cast off as weak, or commitment-phobic, or *for hipsters*. But not labeling any relationship is actually an incredibly powerful idea, because with labels come assumptions.

I think it's fine to have expectations of other people. Expectations are normal, healthy, and in some ways, necessary. **Expectations** are not **assumptions**.

If I say I'll pick you up at 5, and you call me at 4 to confirm and I say "Yep, I'll be there at 5," it is perfectly reasonable of you to have an *expectation* that I will pick you up at 5.

If I say "Let's date" and you think that means "Let's be monogamous, let's not have sexual feelings for anyone else, let's fall in love, let's eventually get married," and I have said nothing to that effect, regardless of what social norms might exist, you have made an *assumption*.

Assumptions are expectations without consent.

Your assumptions about me are none of my business. My assumptions about you are none of your business. If I want to act based on a given assumption, I damn well better tell you what that assumption is and give you the chance to agree to it or not. And then, it stops being an assumption.

I may have a wholly different set of understandings of what a given relationship means, or what a person will do for me, or what our dynamic is. If I never bother to honestly communicate with that person about those understandings, there is no consent given or received.

Everyone's perception is different. Everyone's idea of a situation is, by extension, different. Everyone's definitions, expectations, moralities, ideals, communication styles, interests, and desires are *different*.

3) Stop defining what feelings "mean."

I've heard countless times (and I would guess you have too) the phrase "*He never really loved me because he did this,*" "*She wasn't my real friend if she acted like this,*" "*You never cared, did you? If you did, you wouldn't do this,*" et cetera. Et cetera. Et cetera.

If care is consented to – that is, if it is chosen actively – it can be removed at any time. If love comes from a place of agency and understanding, it can be removed at any time. It also doesn't have to look like anything in particular.

There is nothing *unfair* about ending a friendship, a relationship, at any time for any reason. Even if the ending of the relationship broke the rules agreed upon by both partners. When one party stops consenting to the rules, those rules stop being the rules.

Because the thing about consent is that, when it can't be removed at will, it stops being consent. It becomes an obligation, and obligation doesn't actually exist.

No matter what you do, you are not obligated to it. You do what you agree to do for as long as you agree to do it. You consent to do whatever it is you're doing, even if it feels obligatory, because you can always, always *not do it*. Yes, always.

Even if you don't feel like you have a choice, you do. You've chosen to give into pressure or a sense of obligation over the sense that what you're doing might be something you don't want to do.

4) This whole "I Want You to Want Me" thing.

Let's say I come to your party and only stay for ten minutes before deciding I want to go for a walk instead. You complain that I'm flaky and I always change my mind on a whim. Well, yeah. I did. My mind changed. I wanted to be here, and now I don't.

Would you prefer I stay here when I don't want to be here?

For some people, though most won't likely admit it, the answer is Yes. They do want other people to do what they want them to, regardless of whether or not the other person wants to. For most people, I would guess, the answer isn't Yes, it's, "*I want you to want to be here.*"

Aye, here's the rub. We don't only want to control other people's actions, we want to control their emotions. We want to control their values, their perceptions, their feelings. And we can't. We never, ever can.

Because no one can *make you* feel anything. You just feel things.

I'm wary of any time I feel that my goals, desires, or perceived needs hinge on the actions or emotions of other people. I can't be happy unless you're my boyfriend? I can't be satisfied with myself unless you think I'm pretty? It sounds silly when you put it like that, but it's how a lot of us frame our needs and feelings *all the time*.

Let's call it what it is: We want to control other people, and we can't. We only control ourselves.

The number of times I've wanted to make someone I've been attracted to be attracted to me is higher than I can count. But I'm hard pressed to think of the last time when I honestly wanted to make myself become attracted to someone who was attracted to me. We so often think the problem of the situation lies in others. We wish we could change their actions, feelings, thoughts, behaviors.

And we can't.
We never can.

We can only ever change ourselves, our words, our actions, our ideas, our thoughts. We can hope that the changes we make in ourselves will create the changes we wish to see in others. But we can never know that they can, and we can never force it.

We can help to break down the social norms that make change harder, that limit consent, that make it more difficult to question assumptions and keep people from being able to honestly communicate their needs. We can hope that that creates change, just like we can hope that being kind to a stranger will make them go on to be kind to the next person they see. But we can't ever force change on anyone. We can only control ourselves.

5) Take people at their word.

If you assume someone in your life is telling you anything other than the truth, if you act according to your perception that they're lying, you've removed their agency. You've turned their No into a Yes, or vice versa. This does not mean that they're not lying, but you don't get to decide for them that something is a lie.

If someone isn't honest with you, that isn't your problem.
They've communicated.
Act according to that communication.
If it turns out they were lying, leave it up to them to mention it.

In my opinion, the only way in which anyone else's dishonesty is your problem is if you have coerced them into not being able to express themselves honestly. If you have severely shifted the balance of power between you.

Example: If you hold a gun to someone's head and say "I will shoot you if you don't have sex with me. Would you like to have sex with me?" they're probably going to say "Yes," even if they don't.

The ability to consent is severely limited, because the power dynamic is so imbalanced.

6) So what do you do about power imbalances?

When I say you have complete agency, that anything you do you can consent to and consent not to, this is slightly tempered (but not erased) by power imbalances.

Example: Are you obligated to go to work today? At the end of it, no, you're not. Even if you'll get fired for not going. Even if getting fired means you'll be homeless, lose your mortgage, starve to death. You can always choose not to.

Having agency does not mean there will be no negative consequences from your actions. To assume that you can act with impunity means to assume that others don't have agency. That they cannot respond in their own right to your actions. That you can control yourself and control them.

You may be thinking, "*So... going to work at a job I hate or starving to death? That's not much of a choice.*" And you're right. It's not much of one. It is, still, a choice.

However, the balance of power is stacked against you. You're not obligated to go to work, you're not obligated to do anything, but the choice between going to work and starving to death isn't much of a choice. And when you limit someone's freedom tremendously, when you pit their consent against such high stakes that honesty is tantamount to impossible, then the whole idea of consent rings false.

Imbalanced power tempers consent. By extent, it tempers freedom. It does not eliminate consent or freedom, but it does limit it.

The only world in which honesty and communication reign is a world in which everyone is free, in which everyone has agency and lives the life they consent to.

In conclusion, ten (simple, but difficult) steps...

1. You're allowed to feel anything. Your emotions are *your* responsibility, and other people's emotions are *their* responsibility.
2. If you don't know, ask. Always, always, always *ask*.
3. Listen to the answer.
4. Trust that the other person is being honest, but also accept that there is a whole heap of social conditioning that makes honesty difficult.
5. Accept that any lack of honesty is (usually) not your problem.
6. Be honest yourself.
7. Communicate your needs.
8. Don't make assumptions about other people's needs.
9. Don't assume other people know your needs if you haven't told them.
10. Don't violate consent.