

Encourage Those in Your Care to Be Beginners

“My back has gone out again.” “My blood pressure is spiking up.” “I’m not sleeping so well.” “I’m really getting more anxious.” When hearing these words from those in our care, our first thought might be that the wheels are coming off the track or that something’s out of balance.

Then again, maybe that’s not it at all. Maybe it’s just the opposite. Everything is quite all right. Life is on the move, and our patients are entering brand-new territory. Like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, they realize they’re not in Kansas anymore.

Movement, transformation, and change are constants in life. More often than not, when we speak with patients, they’re transitioning from one place to another, stepping into new territory that’s quite unfamiliar. They don’t yet feel competent, confident, or comfortable, and they face a steep learning curve. Symptoms and signs of discomfort begin to appear. We can offer potent medicine by helping those we’re tending recognize they’re beginners in this new territory.

What kinds of transitions might people be going through?

Being Beginners at Facing New Situations and Events

Patients find themselves needing to adapt to new situations and events regardless of whether they label them positive or negative. We can trust changes are coming when a patient’s son or daughter is about to get married, a hoped-for promotion at work adds greater responsibilities, or a house is bought for the first time. At the negative end of the scale, changes will also come when the economy takes a downward turn and one loses savings, retirement funds, or a job. Getting injured in an accident or being a victim of a natural catastrophe—the list of new situations goes on and on. Maybe most importantly, patients will be beginners when adjusting to a new diagnosis: “You have diabetes ... asthma ... cancer ... you’ve had a stroke.”

Being Beginners at Relationships That Shift and Change

Because we’re such social beings, when our significant relationships change, we change. Maybe a long-time spouse or partner begins to pull back. A son or daughter becomes estranged. We fall head over heels in love. A good friend

g
u
t
t
e
r

moves a long distance away. A wonderful boss at work departs, and chaos results. A loved one gets ill or passes away.

Being Beginners at Moving into New Stages of Their Lives

Childhood and adolescence are often accompanied by their own brand of pains and discomfort. Then come the increasing responsibilities of being spouse, partner, parent, and householder. The elder years can be a treacherous journey for some, filled with declining health and many unknowns. With a little luck, we become wise sages or crones, yet thoughts of mortality are not far away. Each of these stages requires adaptation on all our parts, including those in our care.

As much as we believe we're prepared for new situations, shifting relationships, or different stages of life, the embodied experience of them frequently comes as a surprise. Caught unawares, we're more deeply touched than we'd imagined. Surprised by our own responses, the nagging thought is that we *should* know how to be with these transitions, what to do about them, or what to say. Symptoms and signs of discomfort often begin to manifest on some level of our being.

The phrases below highlight some of the transitions outlined above. Recite the phrases out loud, beginning each phrase with the words: "My patient is a beginner at ...". Notice if anyone in your care comes to mind.

- going off to school for the first time
- taking tests, failing tests
- experiencing puberty, becoming a teenager
- having a first boyfriend or girlfriend
- resolving conflicts
- breaking up with a first boyfriend or girlfriend
- exploring his or her sexuality
- having sex
- falling in love, falling out of love
- going off to college
- having a job, losing a job
- stopping smoking, drinking, or using recreational drugs
- exercising
- gaining weight, losing weight
- being married or in a committed relationship for the first time
- being a mother or father for the first time

- being a mother or father for the second or third time
- being married for ten, twenty, or thirty years
- being separated from a spouse or partner
- being divorced
- returning to school
- having a child die
- having a serious accident or chronic illness
- retiring
- taking care of their aging, ill, or dying parent
- having a parent die
- dying

When patients recognize where they're beginners, a new and compassionate light shines on their discomfort. For example, a woman I'd been treating began to be involved romantically with another woman. This was her first time being in an intimate relationship with a woman—not so for her new partner. My patient was losing sleep and eating less as she took baby steps into the relationship.

I took a risk by suggesting that she was a beginner at being in a relationship with a woman. I shared the metaphor that she was struggling to stay upright on a two-wheeler with training wheels still attached, while her new partner had already spent years tooling around on a racing bike! We both had a great laugh. Good medicine indeed.

Whether we're eight or eighty, each of us finds ourselves beginners: facing new situations or events, navigating changing relationships, or entering new phases of our lives. Symptoms and signs of discomfort often appear or reappear when faced with the new and unfamiliar.

By being beginners, patients let go of thinking they *should* know how to respond in these new situations. Greater ease shows up in their bodies and their physiology. Self-judgments begin to melt. Those tight back muscles begin to relax. Blood pressure drops a few points. Sleep improves. Anxiety decreases. Declaring one's self a beginner sets the stage for the learning that inevitably accompanies healing.

g
u
t
t
e
r