

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

How to Be Effective in Awkward Situations

Have you ever seen an interview with an actor who seemed just brilliant on film, but in the interview without a script to follow, was awkward and a little nutzo, like no one ever taught the person how to be a human being? Whenever I see one of those interviews, I'm grateful for being not-at-all-famous so that the ridiculous things I've said in off moments weren't viewed by thousands of people and recorded for posterity. I realize, though, that being not-famous isn't exactly protection from the tendency to say or do something inappropriate or even hurtful when "off script."

Most of the time, whether famous or not, we go through life as a series of scripted situations. Our hostess says, "So glad you could come," and on cue we respond with something polite like, "Thanks for having me." We walk into the office Monday morning and automatically ask our coworkers, "How was your weekend?" The cashier says, "How are you today?" and we respond with "Good," "Fine," or something else very brief. We learn the "scripts" for these kinds of predictable situations by watching others. Then with practice, we become so accustomed to them that we know what to do or say at these times without even thinking about it.

Now and then, though, we encounter profoundly "off script" situations where the right thing to do or say is not clearly laid out for us: Our lifelong buddy, the emotional equivalent of Spock, suddenly bursts into tears and we can't figure out why. We're in our boss' office being reprimanded when he receives a call telling him that his son's been in a serious car accident. We find out that the fascinating person who just asked us for a date is the same one our roommate's been dating and raving about for months. We're invited to someone else's family dinner and one of their relatives starts behaving really inappropriately to them.

We don't get handed a script for these emotionally-conflicted, awkward situations. They come out of nowhere and we have to ad lib a response in the moment. Even if we've dealt with something a bit like them in the past, there are often elements to the new situation that are different enough that we can't just copy and paste the same response we used before with a guarantee that it will be helpful and effective. If we respond ineffectively, it can hurt our relationships. It's a lot of pressure! Many of us buckle under the anxiety and discomfort of these situations. We end up spastically doing and saying things just to get rid of our anxiety, rather than responding to the situation in ways that strengthen our relationships and improve the situation at hand. Then afterwards, we wonder why the heck we did what we did. Can you think of a time like that in your life?

Before we check out how we might respond to these unscripted, awkward situations in ways that actually strengthen relationships, rather than messing them up, let's first check out the kinds of things we do just to escape our anxiety about these situations, things we later regret. We need to identify what ingrained patterns we need to change before we have a fighting chance of noticing that we're falling back into them. Only then can we stop and do something different.

Five Anxiety-Driven Responses

Making a Quick Exit. If we find mixed emotion and awkwardness particularly painful, even personally threatening, we can assume that others feel the same way. Figuring it must be best for all involved if we end the situation as quickly as possible, we make an excuse to physically leave the situation, or we emotionally flee by saying, “Let’s talk about it later” (meaning never, ever) or, “Let’s just forget this happened.” The problem with this strategy is that it communicates to others in the situation, “What you’re dealing with is so scary that I can’t tolerate being with you in it, let alone talking about what just happened.” It leaves others feeling repulsive and abandoned right in the middle of an already tense situation. Plus, it doesn’t make the awkwardness go away long-term. It sends it underground as this creepy thing that happened that we’re not allowed to bring up. From that point forward, our relationship with the others in the situation doesn’t feel as open or free.

Staying Silent. When we don’t want to hurt others with a quick exit, but we’re terrified that if we say the wrong thing we’ll make the situation worse, we tend to stay physically present, but say nothing. Even though it’s better than fleeing the situation, saying nothing leaves others with uncertainty about what we’re feeling. Since the situation is already stressful and strange, they tend to assume the worst: that the awkwardness has put us out of commission so that they really are alone in facing it, whether we’re physically present or not. Or, they think we are repulsed by them or judging them, but too polite to admit it; so rather than saying something, we’ll gradually leave them or secretly judge them forever.

Creating Distraction. Trying to avoid the pitfalls of a quick exit or silence, we may also respond by quickly changing the subject, rapidly talking about other things or suggesting another activity to do, as if that could make the awkwardness just go away. This communicates to others, “You haven’t weirded me out to the point of leaving you, but I can’t handle what you are experiencing so I need you to change how you are feeling and do something different with me now. I need you to pretend with me that it’s no big deal.” Here, others aren’t allowed to just feel what they are feeling for a bit. They’re right in the middle of something hard and we’re asking them to change quickly to be what we need, rather than letting them focus on what they need for that moment.

Spouting Platitudes. Other times, we feel that the situation should be addressed directly and verbally, but we also feel a pressing need to say something that will make it all “okay.” So we say things to slap a “label” on the situation so that it no longer feels awkward and unscripted. We want the other person to agree with the statement and find it to be a satisfying conclusion so that everyone can move on. These are statements like: “Well, \$#!* happens,” “Just let go and let God,” “You’ll get over it,” “I guess it was just his time to go,” “Everyone’s family’s dysfunctional in some way.” While these have the advantage of letting others know that we are strong enough to address the situation, rather than running, we’re also telling them there’s really only one way they should feel and we can’t accept their feeling differently, or taking a longer time to figure out what to feel, say, or do.

Offering a Quick Fix. We can also try to bring a quick conclusion to the situation by offering simplistic, rash suggestions to others or jumping right into action ourselves. We respond to a discovery of infidelity in a friend’s marriage by saying, “I’ll just go give her a piece of my mind,” or, “I’ll go beat him up.” We overhear our coworker who “has it all together” confessing deep loneliness to a friend on the phone. When the person hangs up, we say, “Hey, no problem! We’ll get you a Match.com account and find you someone great in no time.” While these quick fix solutions are meant to help, they often end up conveying to others, “I know the answer to this

better than you do; it's not as complicated as find it to be; hurry up and be satisfied by my solution." Again, we're really telling them how to feel, plus implying that we know better than they do.

What People Need in Awkwardness, Whether They Know It or Not

If these slap-dash, anxiety-driven ways that we respond to unscripted situations aren't effective, how *can* we respond effectively? We can start by noticing how the previous responses missed the boat, deriving from them some general principles about what people need in the midst of emotionally-conflicted, difficult situations. In general, people want to:

- Feel like we are emotionally or physically present with them, not trying to leave them to face awkwardness and emotional conflict alone.
- Feel that we're capable of addressing the situation directly so that it doesn't go "underground" and make the relationship awkward long-term.
- Know a little about how we are experiencing the situation in the moment so that they aren't left assuming the worst about what we're thinking or feeling.
- Know that we are strong enough to tolerate our own discomfort with the situation long enough to give them some time to let them feel however they need to feel, rather than having to quickly stuff their feelings and needs to accommodate our insistence on a tidy label or a quick fix to the situation.

The tricky part, though, is that even though people typically really need these things in uncomfortable situations, most of them are not going to look right at us and tell us what they need in nice, neat ways that make it easy for us to do what they requested. A lot of times, the people we'd like to help effectively have been wounded in the past by others' responses to their emotional needs. Many people that we'll encounter in awkward situations got told along the way to toughen up, get over things faster, stop being so sensitive, so needy, so emotional. They may have learned that it's not okay to even let *themselves* consider what they need in tricky situations, let alone ask us straight up for what they need.

So the most difficult part of responding effectively, here, is keeping in mind what the person probably needs based on the general principles above and then offering that to the person, *even if they don't look like they need it*.

The Five-Fold Effective Response

We can go a long way to meeting people's unspoken needs in unscripted situations through a combination of:

1. Staying physically and emotionally present,
2. Saying what emotions or confusion we are experiencing,
3. Saying what we want from the situation,
4. Asking what would be helpful, and then,
5. Giving the person space and time to decide what they need.

I'll show you what I mean. In the example where our Spock-like friend suddenly burst into tears for no discernible reason, we could (1) stay with him, rather than coming up with a quick exit strategy, then (2) say, "Man, I'm sorry I don't know what just happened. I must have missed something. (3) I'd like to help somehow, but I'm not sure what you need. (4) Do you need me to

give you some space? Would you like to tell me what happened? Or is there something else you'd like me to do right now?" Then, (5) if he takes a bit to respond, add, "Take your time. I'll be here if you need anything."

Do you see how this response meets the general needs of letting him know we're there, not running; letting him know we can handle talking about the situation, but we don't have to; not leaving him fearfully guessing about what we're thinking about him; and giving him the space to feel whatever he's feeling before deciding what he needs from us?

Let's try again, this time with the situation where we're being reprimanded by our boss and he learns about his son's car accident. Again, we could (1) stay there, rather than running right out of the office, then (2) say, "I can't believe that just happened. I'm so sorry. I want you to know that was seriously listening to the ways you want me to change my work and I want to finish that discussion with you. But I also want to respect what you just heard. (3) I'd like to do whatever might be helpful for you right now, but I'm not sure what that would be. (4) Would you like me to stay or leave you be? Do you need me to handle anything at the office so you can go to your son?" Then, (5) if he can't respond for a while, say, "I'm here if you need anything."

Or, with the roommate who was dating the guy who just asked us out, we could (1) stay put, then (2) say, "I had no idea you were dating him. I'm so sad and disappointed that in trying to share my excitement with you about a new date, I ended up hurting you. (3) I want to figure out how to handle your disappointment about this and mine and decide what would be best to do from here. (4) Do you need some time to think about this alone or would you like to talk more now? Is there anything else you need from me that would help right now? (5) Take some time if you need to."

Responding in this way definitely takes practice in overcoming our natural flee, freeze, or fix responses. It's not natural for us to verbalize the emotions or confusion that we're experiencing, admit that we don't know what to do to help in *this* particular situation with *this* person or group, and then be open to helping in whatever way is needed, rather than in whatever way we tend to prefer. The five-fold response can't guarantee that others will look at us in that moment dewy-eyed, and say, "Ah, thanks! That's exactly what I needed." But even if they snap back that they need us to go away and give them space or, out of anger and sadness that is looking for a target, say something like, "You, of all people, should know what I need by now," the fact that we stayed present and gave an open offer of help, rather than making the situation about our own anxiety still counts! When the awkwardness and sharp emotion pass, most sane people will be able to remember our support. Even if we can't fix the situation in the moment, at the very least, we will have prevented ourselves from adding relational hurt to the awkwardness. We'll have saved the relationship to smooth out some later day.

Thanks for reading!

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