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Give Someone a Break

By Melody Bowdon
UCF Forum columnist
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About 20 years ago, when I was a graduate student in Tucson, Arizona, I befriended two neighbors who worked as traveling nurses taking short-term jobs at hospitals in interesting places around the country. John and Sue had met a few years earlier when they served together in a busy metropolitan hospital, an often stressful environment.

They dealt with patients and family members who were pushed to their physical, mental, and emotional limitations; fairly frequently this reality erupted in unpleasant behavior toward nurses, the frontline caregivers. My friends described experiences of being yelled at, punched, and more while working in this setting. As you might imagine of people willing to move to a new hospital every few months, these two are adventurous, optimistic, compassionate, and tough, so they found positive ways to deal with their challenges.

When I met them, they had a long-standing shorthand for talking about unpleasant people. They explained the history of their catchphrase to me, but also helped me understand that over time they'd come to apply this analysis to people outside the hospital. If someone cut them off in traffic, acted like a jerk in a public place, or otherwise behaved obnoxiously, they'd look at each other and say, "She's in pain," or "He's in pain," chuckle a bit, and move on without taking the incident personally.

While pain doesn't explain or justify every negative experience we have with our fellow humans, I do think that John and Sue were onto something here.

Despite the arguably substantial number of what psychologist Martha Stout calls “the sociopath(s) next door,” I would argue that many of the people we encounter in daily life are struggling with something painful, though our frequent phatic questions like “How are you?” and “Are you having a good summer?” rarely elicit the details of those challenges.

And while MIT professor Sherry Turkle, who has long studied human/computer interaction, argues that we find ourselves “alone together” on social media, I had to look no further than my Facebook account to find evidence of these struggles.

This week a close friend of mine is recovering (fantastically, bravely, but painfully) from a bilateral mastectomy. My classmate from junior high is mourning the sudden death of her father, and at least three of my contacts are worrying over pets with serious illnesses. One close friend is requesting prayer for her daughter, who is on a mission trip in an area hit hard by a recent typhoon. And everyone who teaches college (a big chunk of my social circle) is beginning to fret over the impending end of another too-short summer and the beginning of another crazy fall.

Meanwhile, more than one of my admittedly middle-aged network is in physical pain with an abscessed tooth or injured back. Of course, like anyone else’s, my news feed is also full of joyful announcements of pregnancies, pictures from once-in-a-lifetime vacations, news about exciting new jobs and relationships, and, just now, the victorious end to the search for the perfect burrito.

So the humble point of this column is not to bring us all down and suggest that we’re constantly surrounded by secret misery. It’s just to remind others and myself to give people a break when we can.

Having taught college for almost 25 years, I have heard lots of classroom excuses, such as grandmothers who mysteriously manage to die twice in one year to every make and model of computer and transportation problem. A good number of them have been true; a smaller but not inconsequential portion have been dubious at best, but I do not regret a single time when I have given a grieving or stressed-out person a kind response, a bit

of perspective, a little break. And I can think of some instances where I wish I'd been more compassionate, patient, and engaged.

But if I'm going to buy into the "people are in pain; give them a break" mindset, and encourage others to do so, I have to apply it to myself and recognize that there are good reasons from my own life why I've been unable to be my ideal self in many situations.

A few days ago I was short-tempered with a seemingly disorganized host at a local restaurant. When I stopped to think about it, I realized I was being unnecessarily grouchy because I was in pain. Not emergency room pain, of course—not physical pain or even emotional anguish—but discomfort and disappointment, however mild, along with underlying worries that I needed to release.

I thought in that moment, as I often do, of my friends John and Sue, and about the importance of letting things go, laughing things off, and moving on.

That awareness (along with the perfect burrito) is my wish for everyone.

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