

Choosing Courageous Wellbeing Can We Talk? ¹

By Mary Elaine Kiener, RN, PhD

How can three little words strike such fear and dread inside? When someone asks “Can we talk?”, I instantaneously assume “I’ve done something wrong!” Yet, the resulting conversation is often quite “harmless”. So much adrenaline and worry wasted over something that was never going to happen!

I recently found myself immersed in a variety of “we NEED to talk” discussions with several different people within a concentrated period of time. The intensity of these conversations—both in time span and range—offered me a seminal edge for deeper learning, growth and—ultimately—healing.

From a quiet space inside, I intuited something deeply personal about challenging conversations that I find are so difficult and painful. I could sense an underlying feeling of fear, as I acknowledged a shaky-tightness in the front and center of my chest. This was followed by a slippery-slope kind of connection to something even further underneath. There, I recognized an all-too-familiar shame-filled and guilt-ridden territory of “I’m not doing it right”.

Then, two recent memories emerged, seemingly connected, yet distinct. In the first, I recalled being part of a group experience in which each participant later acknowledged feeling uncomfortable, while also identifying an inner sense of guilt as they recalled their individual response within the situation. In the 2nd, I marveled that a friend could seamlessly shift from a rare, transparent moment of vulnerability while discussing her current pain and anxiety right back into her usual bright and chipper cheerleader mode - as if her acknowledged feelings had never existed.

In the midst of all this, I recognized how difficult it has always been for me to identify (let alone “be with”) my own negative emotions. Both in my childhood upbringing and in relationship with my late husband, emotional expression was eschewed, in favor of thought-filled, “logical” dialogue. This continual de-valuing of negative emotional responses only served to compound my ongoing challenges around “feeling not heard”—in spite of any well-reasoned, unemotional response I might carefully present.

I noticed a pattern: Each conversation included both a strong negative emotion and some combination of inner judgment, guilt, shame and/or blame. An inner invitation soon followed: Might I be able/willing to acknowledge and name my negative feelings as they occur? And/or compassionately notice whether it is a “pure” emotion or one that is linked with judgment/blame of myself or another?

Since then, I have found that naming my feelings continues to present a personal challenge. It is easier to separate out and let go of lingering judgments. I can even laugh about remaining minuscule, tingly “uh-ohs” inside when a colleague invites me to her office “to talk”. And, not surprisingly, I immediately, wholeheartedly and compassionately understand a friend’s plea to “Just tell me what I did wrong!” in response to my asking whether we might talk.

¹ Kiener, M.E. (2016, September). Choosing Courageous Wellbeing: Can We Talk? *Sibyl Magazine. For the Spirit and Soul of Woman*. Retrieved from www.sibylmagazine.com.