

Book Review

The Etiquette of Illness: What to Say When You Can't Find the Words

Susan P. Halpern; New York NY: Bloomsbury, 2004.

'Wounded healer' Susan Halpern offers wisdom concerning what to say in a wide range of illness situations. She speaks from her experience as a social worker and psychotherapist counselling people with serious illness and as a person with repeated bouts of cancer.

This informative guide outlines concrete ways for both conversational partners to improve communication –the friend, family member, or even professional and the ill person herself. More importantly, the many anecdotes from both perspectives create an open attitude toward reaching out to those who are ill – trying to understand their feelings and doing kind deeds – rather than hiding in our uncertainty. Part of this open attitude is to ask if something would be helpful, do it, and then ask for feedback – i.e., *Was this actually helpful, or how could it have been done in a better way?* We also learn here that illness makes people especially sensitive and more insistent on their own way and that what ill people prefer changes over time and circumstances.

Especially useful for aging are the tips offered for chronic illness and end of life situations. Suggestions for how to address the subject of a friend's illness include: *What is this like for you?; I see that the condition has left some changes?; or Do you want to talk about your condition?* Suggestions for how an ill person can respond to receiving help include: *I am so touched. I feel strange being so helpless, and you helped me without taking away my independence.*

In chronic illness, responding to the usual greeting 'How are you?' becomes problematic. Sometimes a person needs to talk through recent changes in the illness, at other times a person needs to become engaged in other topics. So one might ask *Do you want me to ask how you are today?* – enabling the individual to choose. Or, you might say *I've been thinking about you; or I see all you do to keep going.*

The specific tips are offered in the spirit that we should let compassion be our guide. The value of attentive listening and companionable silence are highlighted – sometimes saying nothing, or at least pausing, may be best. Good intentions and awareness can help us maintain a relationship despite bumps when we don't say quite the right thing.

Ellen Ryan

Writing, Aging and Spirit: www.writingdownouryears.ca