

LEAD

## People Who Avoid These 3 Common Words Have Very High Emotional Intelligence

It's not that it's wrong. It's that I think you can do better.

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Imagine we're having a conversation. What kind of small talk would you use to start?

If the answer is something like "Hi, how are you?" then this column is for you.

Because it turns out there's a solid argument for why choosing a different phrase could subtly improve the ways that other people perceive you.

It's not that "How are you?" and its cousins – things like "How ya doin'?" and "What's going on?" – are horrendous. They're conventions, and we all use them.

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Heck, I catch myself using them sometimes, and I'm the guy writing this article.

Nearly every time we open a conversation like this, however, we're starting out with an agreement to avoid the truth. It's a social convention in which everybody knows that what we say and what we mean are very different things.

You understand instinctively. Most of the time, you don't ask "How are you?" because you actually want the other person to answer your question seriously.

Instead, you want them to say the expected thing: "Fine, thanks, how are you?" so that you can proceed to whatever else is really on your mind.

Just because we know objectively what's going on, however, doesn't mean there's no subjective and negative effect—and that's where emotional intelligence comes in.

Some people understand deeply that, if they start with a "How are you" question but never ask a follow-up (and especially if the other person in the conversation starts to give an honest or lengthy answer that is met with impatience or disinterest), it becomes distractingly clear that the question came from a place of self-centeredness, as opposed to other-centeredness.

Again: sometimes you have to be self-centered. Sometimes, we just need to cut to the chase and get things done. But there are other options. And people with a heightened sense of emotional intelligence ask themselves: Why send an unintentional, somewhat negative message if you don't have to?

Of course, you don't need to take my word for this. Researchers at Harvard Business School analyzed hundreds of conversations to determine what kinds of questions led to better reactions.

They found two interesting conclusions:

First, people who simply ask more questions, and follow-up questions – who go beyond "How are you?" for example – were "better liked by their conversation partners."

Second, conversation partners who were told to ask more questions were perceived as being "higher in responsiveness, [which is] an interpersonal construct that captures listening, understanding, validation, and care."

Frankly, all of this is even more acute right now, given the pandemic and recession. For so many, the truthful answer to "How are you?" isn't what they wish it to be – and maybe not what they'd like to dwell on at the moment.

Ashley Fetters put it well in *The Atlantic* recently: "To ask 'How are you?' is either to make the conversation very gloomy, very fast or to force someone to lie straight to your face and say they're fine. We need better questions to ask."

In that vein, I also want to credit Gary Burnison at CNBC for making the connection between the Harvard study and the three-word phrase in particular. Of course there are times when "How are you? is sincere, when we really want to know how things are going.

In those cases, the key is to follow-up, and then follow-up again.

As the Harvard researchers pointed out, don't stop with the three-word query, and even better, be specific if you have the knowledge to do so. As I suggested recently, it's the difference between asking specific things like

*"Jennifer, before we begin, how was Ryan's first day of virtual kindergarten yesterday?"*

As opposed to, simply:

*"How was everyone's weekend--good?"*

Now, let's go back to the more controversial example.

If you're using "How are you?" as a conversation-starter, but, in truth, you're dreading the idea that anyone might take you seriously and launch into an expansive, truthful answer, the best advice is to stick instead with a positive declaration.

Not a question, but instead something like:

**"I'm happy to see you."**

"Thank you for being here—let's get started."

"I hope you had a nice weekend," or "I hope your family is doing well."

Or just a plain, simple: "Good morning."

See the difference? These are positive messages, and though they're not particularly other-centered, they're also not overly self-centered. They're closer to neutral.

(By the way, if you're on the receiving end of "How are you?" or even "I hope your family is doing well," and you honestly don't want to answer in great detail, the easy, polite way out is just to say "Thank you for asking" without offering any other details.)

Also, don't make inauthentic conversation-starter questions even worse by suggesting the answer in the question itself, as in the "How was your weekend—good?" question above and similar things, like: "Everybody has what they need, right?"

Again, I'm not here to criticize. Frankly, this is a great time to recommit to some the best advice you'll ever hear, namely: "Don't forget to be kind to yourself."

But if you're still using "How are you?" to open conversations, I think you can probably do better. And the people you're having conversations with know it too.

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