

Please Don't Ask

Category: Crying

written by Sharon Dobie | April 2, 2017

"Please don't ask" was my silent plea to my patient as I entered the exam room. I knew if she did, I would start crying, and not for the first time that day.

We've known each other for thirty-three years. She was my favorite checker at the neighborhood grocery, the one whose greeting usually was "There she is—that crazy woman." As a single mom, raising a grandchild or two and a foster son, she loved to ride me about adopting one and then another infant. Along the way, she became my patient, retired from her job, and handled her own health concerns. At some point during every visit she'd ask, "How are the boys?"

I've been doing this work a long time, and I've shed tears with patients, both happy and sad, during their births, their deaths and other victories and challenges of theirs. They share so much life with me. And along the way, from time to time, many have heard stories about my sons and our lives.

This was different.

"How are you?" I opened. "Catch me up on your life. Oh, my, those beads are gorgeous." (She became an expert beader in retirement.)

We talked about her kids, her grandkids, her surveillance of her cancer, her beadwork, and the concern that had brought her for a visit that day. I examined her, and we talked about next steps. We ended the visit—almost.

I had my hand on the doorknob when she asked, "How are the boys?" Wishing I could pretend I hadn't heard her and just leave, I instead turned around.

"Matt came down with a bad pneumonia last month. I was with him in the ICU for 16 days. They couldn't pull him out of it, and he died on the 16th."

She crumpled. "No, no, no!" I held her as she held me, both of us crying. I was reminded once again of the importance of the relationships we form with our patients.

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