

RU OK? Community Comment Mike Goldsby, September 13, 2012

Are you OK? Do you have someone in your life that asks you that? Have you asked someone that recently?

Today, September 13, is R U OK? Day in Australia. R U OK? is not spelled out. It is the letter R and the letter U, in that annoying text message style.

It is similar to Suicide Prevention Week in the United States. The focus is very simple. Reach out to somebody because a conversation could change a life. The day was established by an Australian, Gavin Larkin, who lost his father to suicide. Larkin was devastated by how few people had reached out to him and he became determined to establish a culture of reaching out, of social connectedness.

RU OK? Website has a number of video testimonials from people who have suffered from depression, bullying, discrimination or thoughts of suicide and how one conversation helped them start to turn that around. The list includes regular people and celebrities and sports figures. The only one I recognized was Hugh Jackman. But every story had a theme. People in despair feel alone and need someone to reach out. It makes a difference.

The foundation commissioned a survey of Australian workers and said they found a culture of avoidance. They report 46% of Australian workers surveyed would rather look for a new job than face an existing conflict at work. Remember, their economy is doing better than ours. The survey found almost half of the workers admit to calling in sick to avoid some workplace conflict.

The workers said their managers did not have the skills necessary to address the situation, so the managers avoided it as well. All agreed that the end effect was to lower employee engagement, increase absenteeism and lower productivity.

R U OK? encourages people to be honest. Say "I am not OK," if that is what is going on. And they teach people how to respond to that statement. How to make meaningful suggestions.

I remember a patient I worked with in an addiction treatment program. This patient said his boss asked "How are you doing?" The patient responded "Not so good today." And the boss responded, "That's nice" and walked away. The patient said he wished his boss hadn't even asked, if he didn't really care or wasn't even listening.

About 7 years ago, I had my job eliminated, a job I had been in for 17 years. It was impressive how many of my former co-workers avoided me. But what was more meaningful was the few who went out of their way to check in, see how I was doing, offer help.

It is uncomfortable to talk to someone who has just experienced loss or grief. You don't know what to say. Nobody knows what to say. But the simple act of checking in is more important than the exact words you use.

There are plenty of times when I wish I had asked "Are you OK?" I guess I can try harder next time.

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment.