Looking Good with Hepatitis C

August 22, 2016 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

Few words are more irritating to someone who has hepatitis C, particularly when they are on treatment than, “You look good.” During my hepatitis C treatments, I cannot tell you how often I heard, “You look great,” and think, “Yes, the pale pallor of anemia leaves my skin milky white. Would you like to see the rash that seems to be everywhere other than my face and feet? It’s gorgeous.”

Talk to hepatitis C patients, and ask them if they are bothered by these glowing remarks about their appearance, and chances are they will say yes. Although the comments are well-intended, the recipient feels invalidated rather than complimented. Further, we sometimes hide how we feel. Our society values beauty, strength, and productivity. When we can’t live up to those standards we may conceal our illness. When asked, “How are you?” we will often reply that we are fine—even if we aren’t.

We may have good reasons for not wanting to admit that we don’t feel well. It may be inappropriate in social or professional situations to be overly honest. President George H.W. Bush probably didn’t tell the Prime Minister of Japan that he wasn’t feeling well before emptying his stomach contents on Miyazawa at a state dinner. We expect our president to be invincible; we don’t want to see him sick, and he is unlikely to admit as such.

Although we aren’t heads of state, we may not want our bosses, neighbors, or casual acquaintances to know that we have hepatitis C. We are vulnerable when we are ill and admitting we are sick makes us feel more vulnerable. Acting as if we are fine is a way to exert control in a situation over which we feel powerless.

It takes courage to admit being unwell. Recently a close friend asked me, “How are you?” I told her the truth, and it was more than she wanted to hear. She was just calling to borrow a cup of sugar. With tongue in cheek, she told me she’ll never ask me how I am again.

Perhaps we can’t educate people, or get them to understand how difficult treatment is; how their well-meaning remarks hurt, rather than help us. However, what we can do is use our yearning for sympathy and understanding to teach us how to be compassionate. One day I will ask my friend, “How are you?” and she will need me to listen to her answer. If nothing else, hepatitis C treatment has shown me how to be more sympathetic.

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