

What the Matter Is

by: Skye Thomas

When my oldest boy was really young, he tickled my mother with that phrase. I would ask him, "What's the matter?" and he would answer me, "Well, what the matter is..." followed by whatever it was that he needed to discuss with me. He would say it with that very serious face that children get when they are expecting to be taken very seriously. We all loved the cute way he prefaced his concerns. I overheard my daughter talking to my two year old the other day and it caused me to remember those days long ago when her older brother used to talk about 'what the matter is.' At thirteen, Sissy is a natural healer and nurturer. She hovers over her baby brother kissing all of his owies and making sure that life is gentle and kind to him. We have many debates over just how much mothering is smothering, but that's another topic for another day. What caught my attention that day was that while our little Buddha Napoleon was whining and grumbling in his two year old lingo, she was continually asking him, "What's wrong?" She repeatedly asked it in the most loving and dear voice. "What's wrong?" You could definitely tell that she was genuinely concerned and wanted to know what was bothering him and how could she help. "What's wrong?" Over and over she asked him, "What's wrong?" as he babbled incoherently at her about something that was obviously 'wrong' in his world. I found myself getting really annoyed. But why? I began thinking about why that question repeated in such a sugar coated voice was bothering me so deeply. Then it hit me. This is the core of where we learn to think that something is wrong with our lives. It's that question asked of us since the cradle. "What's wrong?" That gets us thinking that something is actually wrong. I told her to shift her question to "What's the matter?" I told her that it means the same as "What's the topic?" She could also say, "Tell me why you are upset." Or ask him "Why are you crying?" She could also ask him, "How can I help?" Make the conversation about the topic or event without actually assuming that something in life must be 'wrong'. Just because we are upset or frustrated doesn't mean that life is wrong. Asking someone, "What's wrong?" immediately puts them into the mind frame of describing what is wrong with their circumstances. They focus only on the negative and not on problem solving or solutions. They aren't focused on their own role in creating the situation. By asking someone, "What's wrong?" we are doing them a disservice. We are sending them down the wrong path. The goal should be to guide them towards finding peace within the moment, towards finding solutions, towards self esteem and other things that help them move through the difficult times in their life. Funny thing words, such power can come from a small shift in vocabulary. My personal favorite is to ask, "So tell me, what do you need?" Another favorite is, "So, what do you want to do about it?" This immediately puts them into a place of looking at a future where the negative circumstances is no longer perceived as such. What skills and tools would help them to overcome their problem? These types of questions also open up the door so that I can also propose that they might need to make a shift in attitude towards the problem or person bothering them. From that point, we can begin to take inventory of what skills and tools they already possess. We can begin looking at how to implement the changes they want to see. We can also begin brainstorming for ways to manifest whatever skills or tools they might need to acquire. It's a very solution oriented question. Quite often, I don't end up doing much of anything to actually fix their problem. Mostly, I just pose the right questions to get their minds moving in a different direction other than being angry or hurt by their experiences. If they really need my help, then naturally I roll up my sleeves and pitch in, but rarely do they need anything more than a different attitude and approach to life's ups and downs. This change in how we can show our care and compassion towards others applies to everyone regardless of age. Try it the next time a coworker is grumbling about the boss. Ask them, "Well, what do you think we should do to start making changes around here?" The next time your teenager starts sniveling about how unfair life is, ask them, "How do you propose we make it more fair for everyone involved and not just you?" When you find your spouse looking like they're close to tears, ask "How can I help you to feel better?" These types of questions get the person looking forward towards a time when they might not be miserable anymore. With little kids especially, it would really help to use these kinds of questions to mold their original understandings about problem solving. It's better to get them used to looking towards creating a life they find joyful rather than towards finding fault with the world. We cannot just fix everything for them, and we cannot teach them to whine and complain. We have to teach them that it is possible to turn adversity into opportunity. We really owe it to our children to teach them how to open up and ask for help when they are overwhelmed. At the same time, we have to make sure they know they will be solving their own problems. It's never too soon to teach our children how to take responsibility for what kind of experiences they are having. Help them when they really need it, but most of the time they just need to be reminded that they're perfectly capable of fixing it themselves. Copyright 2004, Skye Thomas, Tomorrow's Edge

About the Author

Skye Thomas is the CEO of Tomorrow's Edge, an Internet leader in inspiring leaps of faith. She became a writer in 1999 after twenty years of studying spirituality, metaphysics, astrology, personal growth, motivation, and parenting. Her books and articles have inspired people of all ages and faiths to recommit themselves to the pursuit of happiness. After years of high heels and business clothes, she is currently enjoying working from home in her pajamas. To read more of her articles, sign up to receive her free weekly newsletter, and get free previews of her books go to

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