

Wit: how are you
feeling today?



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Margaret Edson's play *Wit*, devalues the question 'how are you feeling today?' by the lack of emotion and the harsh clinical empathy that ruins the effect of the query in order to highlight the professional, physical, mental, and spiritual connotations behind the meaning of the question. Medical students across the world are taught "the importance of...providing compassionate care" (Meltzer). Due to the fact that the question is repeated multiple times throughout the day, it becomes routine instead of genuine compassion.

Vivian Bearing, a professor who is diagnosed with advanced metastatic ovarian cancer, opens up the play with an everyday question, "Hi. How are you feeling today?" (5). She assures the audience that this is not her usual formal opening, and in fact, is the beginning of a question lacking emotion. In fact, this is just the beginning of what will only amount to more of this formal perfunctory greeting. Due to her more professional mannerism, Vivian informs the audience she would say hello instead. Jason Posner is the oncology clinical fellow and a former student of Vivian. He is often the one who is asking Vivian how she is doing. To answer the question, Vivian just says "fine", due to obligation as it is the accepted answer. When she answers fine, Jason "satisfies his desire to empathize with his patient and minimizes Vivian's actual feelings..." (Amanatullah). Jason simply asks the question to maintain his professional aura. There is one part where Vivian becomes furious at Dr. Harry Kelekian, her primary doctor, for his inability to understand her physical pain. Thus, she sits up and rhetorically asks the audience "[Is she] in pain?" "to emphasize the irony of medical compassion"

(Amanatullah). She is angry at Dr. Kelekian mainly because he is not giving her a second thought as he asks about how she is feeling.

The physical attribute behind ‘how are you feeling today?’ is the leading force behind deciding if Vivian is truly sick or not. While she may lie, saying she is fine, her vitals or visible symptoms say otherwise. In the beginning, Vivian honestly answers the question, stating that “it is not very often that [she does] feel fine” (5). There are several instances where Vivian may be asked this and she happens to be “while throwing up in a plastic washbasin” (5). She is even asked, possibly in excruciating pain and on anesthesia, after a “four-hour operation with a tube in every orifice” (5). When Vivian returns to the hospital in a “shaking, feverish, weakened state [Jason] begins, as usual, with ‘how are you feeling?’” (Amanatullah). The question has turned from a true inquiry to a greeting that is asking the person in an attempt to be polite. It has come to the truth that people do not want the real answer; it is easier to say fine rather than rattle off a list of aches and pains.

Clinical empathy plays on mental well-being and happiness in patients. Due to the obligation that patients feel to just say they are fine, doctors take it as is because it is “not something [they] want to do nor feel comfortable doing...” (Meltzer). Vivian shows a lack of empathy towards her students as seen in flashbacks, but when her “physicians have been unable or unwilling to offer her the emotional support...” and instead, she needs Susie “to support her emotionally, Vivian no longer needs to have uncompromisingly strong character” (Amanatullah). Vivian begins breaking down mentally as she comes to terms with her past actions such as giving Jason an A minus and declining a student’s wish to have an extension. Guilt begins eating at <https://assignbuster.com/wit-how-are-you-feeling-today/>

her, and Vivian starts craving for the compassion that she never really received, which can be seen when she latches onto Nurse Susie Monahan who is one of the only characters to truly attend to Vivian's fears.

After her emotional breakdown at the lack of compassion on Dr. Kelekian's end, Vivian slowly begins "her silent acceptance of both life and death" (Amanatullah). The question eventually shifts almost into a spiritual awakening for Vivian. Her last coherent words are "Hi. How are you feeling today?" (72). She then remembers what her professor told her about using a capital d and commas and exclamation points for Holy Sonnet 10: Death, be not proud by John Donne. She is accepting to succumb to death at that current moment by remembering that certain lesson. After Vivian's studying of Donne's works, she begins to realize that the truth is she does not know as much as she believed about life or death. Vivian only confronts at the most difficult point when she comes to "understand that intellect is only one aspect of being human" (Cohen). Her spiritual awakening behind the question only occurs when her cancer forces her "to look at her own life, does she truly understand Donne's fears and spiritual struggle" (Cohen). As Vivian begins to accept the spirituality that comes with the cancer, she slowly begins to let go of life.

Through professional, physical, mental, and spiritual emphasis behind 'How are you feeling today?', Vivian is able to understand that there is more to life than knowledge; and Jason is unable to provide genuine compassion due to the need for knowledge is more important. Changing the routine question to one with feeling, it is possible that the different emphasis' will change to accommodate patients and how they feel.

Works Cited

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