

Dialog 9: Natalie and George

Helps a Family Member / Initiates the Conversation / Has Baggage Around the Issue

Natalie, 54 years old, has been living a healthy lifestyle for the past nine years. Eating right, exercising, meditating. She's the only one of her siblings who's a healthy weight, and doesn't have a chronic medical condition managed by multiple prescriptions. Their father died of a heart attack when he was 47.

Her younger brother George has been obese for many years. He's on meds for high blood pressure and high cholesterol, and is prediabetic. She's been trying to get him to change his diet, in particular, for years. She sends him articles, recommends documentaries, invites him to events, and bugs him literally every time she talks to him about changing. He's been resistant. He loves his rich food too much — he'd rather die early than live miserably. Also, he insists that his conditions are genetic, and there's nothing he can do about them.

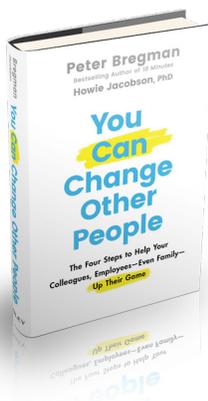
Last month, George was admitted to the hospital complaining of severe chest pain, and his cardiologist urged him to schedule bypass surgery as soon as possible. Natalie wants to get through to him before it's too late. But she knows that he's tired of hearing about the healthy food thing, and has been making excuses not to talk to her when she calls.

Can she use the Four Steps to make headway?

Step 1: Permission

Inner Prep

In call after call, Natalie ends up yelling at George. She's frustrated because she believes that his suffering is self-inflicted, and totally unnecessary. She asks herself, "What are the positive values and needs behind my desire to change George?"



She already knows all this, of course: She loves him, she's scared that he'll die at the same age as their dad. As his big sister, she was always the one who looked out for him. Being responsible and taking care of family are important values. Natalie sits with these positive values and needs, and starts feeling kinder and more generous toward herself.

Next, she thinks about George. Why is he so stubborn and, yes, selfish? He's got a family, with three young kids. Does he really think it's OK to die and leave them to carry on, the way dad did? When he could turn the whole thing around by just listening to her and giving it a try for one month. That would be all the time he'd need to prove it to himself.

She takes a 2-minute meditation break, and comes back to the question: "What's good about George's 'bad' behavior?" What is it doing for him? Well, unhealthy food sure is pleasurable, at least on the way in. And George has had a hard life. An unsatisfying life. A brutal divorce. She can see how food can be the one thing that reliably makes him happy each day.

And given how little control he feels over his life — going to work every day for rent and child support and a mortgage on a house that's no longer his home, and seeing the kids every other weekend — Natalie can understand his resistance to being told what to do or given helpful advice. Food is the one part of his life where he can do as he pleases.

Finally, Natalie asks herself what outcome she wants, for both of them. And the answer comes to her immediately: she'd like them to have a great relationship for decades to come. Which means George has to get healthy, and she can't damage their connection by insisting that he change.

Natalie decides that she will not bring up the topic of George's health. She'll wait for him to do it. That will be her opening. And she's sure he'll mention something about it when he comes over to visit her and her family this evening.

With all this inner work done, Natalie's ready to talk to George.

Asking for Permission

Natalie: Hey, George, come in. How are you?

George: Fine. (Out of breath from climbing up the front stoop) Actually, in a lot of pain.

Natalie: Sorry to hear that. Come sit down. What's new?

George: Not much. Kristie's mad that I want the kids for spring break. I've already asked for those vacation days at work, so if we can't negotiate this I'm out of luck.

Natalie: That sounds so frustrating! Can I get you a glass of water? Dinner will be ready in 20 minutes, so let me know if you want a snack to tide you over.

George: No, I ate before I got here. I figured you'd be making some tofu thing, so I came prepared.

Natalie: (thinking, "Serenity now!") Actually, tonight is a tofu-free zone. We're having lasagna and Caesar salad.

George: Really? I may have misjudged you, sis. That sounds like real food.

Natalie: Don't be shy to tell me what you think when you taste it. It's from a new cookbook. So, what else is going on in your life?

George: I'm getting ready to schedule the bypass surgery. This last scare was enough for Dr Taiwo to insist that we get it done.

Natalie: How are you feeling about that?

George: Scared. I know I have to do it, but I'm terrified of not surviving the operation.

Natalie: Is the surgery your only option?

George: He says it's too late for a stent.

Natalie: I'm sorry you have to deal with all this. It's a bum hand you've been dealt.

George: Yeah, I'm really scared.

Natalie: You know what I'm thinking, right?

George: (stiffens) We aren't going to have that conversation again, are we?

Natalie: I know I've been really annoying. Like, for years.

Empathy (chapter 10) and lots of small talk to get George from defensive to discovery mode (chapter 15).

Continued empathy (chapter 10).

When I changed my diet, I turned into this fanatic, trying to preach my new religion to anyone and everyone. You know I even used to lecture the checkout cashiers at Wegmans? And I got into an argument with the receptionist at my dentist's office because I couldn't help myself commenting on the sub she was eating for lunch. I can only imagine how much grief I must have given you over the years, given how much I love you. I'm so sorry.

Lot of emotional courage here, to express empathy, be vulnerable, and ask for forgiveness (chapter 5).

George: Yeah, you've been pretty brutal. Kristie and I used to bet on how long it would take from when you walked in the door to when you would say something critical about the food, or talk about a new nutrition book, or something like that.

Natalie: I'm so embarrassed. Who used to win the bets, by the way?

George: Whoever gave you the least credit.

Natalie: Oh dear. Can you forgive me?

George: Yes, sis. I know you mean well.

Natalie: Thanks. I do mean well, and I'm scared for you. And to be completely transparent, I've been thinking about dad a lot lately. And how hard it was for us...

George: You think I haven't been? I'll be the age he died in less than seven months.

Natalie: Less than seven months?

Verbal encourager -- repeating the last few words to get George to continue to open up (Bonus web chapter: Empathy).

George: Yup. It really makes you think. When I'm really low, I can picture my gravestone. With the birth date, and the death date, and...

Natalie: George, I know I don't have the right to ask this, not after everything, but — if you could do something and get healthy, would you? I know you don't believe it's possible, so I'm not asking you that. But I just want to know, if you knew that something could work, and give you another 30 or 40 years or so, would you try it?

Continuing to acknowledge and take responsibility for past harm, especially when initiating the conversation (chapter 11).

George: Hypothetically? Yes, I think I would.

Natalie: Even if it were hard?

George: I want to be there for my kids. I want to watch them graduate college. I want to see my grandkids. It hurts that dad never met his.

Natalie: You know I'm no expert. And when I was lecturing you, I knew just enough to be dangerous — I had literally

watched one 90-minute documentary on healthy eating. So I don't know exactly what you should do — but I have talked to people who've recovered from severe heart disease. Some of them were literally about to be wheeled into the OR when they decided to try something different. If you could talk to one of them, would you?

George: I'd be willing to listen.

[Natalie isn't positioning herself as the helper. Instead, she's offering to facilitate a meeting.]

Natalie realizes that her goal of getting George to listen to her is probably unattainable at this point. Instead, she offers to connect him to people whose experience and expertise he'd be impressed by.

Step 2: Outcome

Natalie: What would be your goal? What would you like to happen?

George: If I could not need the surgery, and not feel like a ticking time bomb all the time.

Natalie: Anything else? Any other things about being sick bothering you?

George: The kids miss roughhousing with me. And I hate how Kristie is always telling them to take it easy with me. Even though she's right. I'd love to be a fun dad again. I mean, the fun we have now is all about movies and video games and pizza and burgers and all the stuff Kristie doesn't allow during the week. I'm a walking divorced dad cliché.

Natalie: I want that for you too. I remember what a hoot you were as a kid, how you could make everyone laugh, even mom when she was mad at you. And how you always had more energy than anyone else in the house. I still see that kid when I look at you.

George: I'd love a time machine.

Natalie's genuinely curious. She's asking because she wants to understand what George is going through, not to motivate him by getting him to articulate the costs of not changing (chapter 14).

Step 3: Opportunity

What's happening now?

What have you tried?

Natalie: I know you'd never want to give me the satisfaction, but I'm real curious: Did you ever try to

Natalie decides skip this part. They both know how George has been eating and living, more or less. Instead, she explores the barriers to change.

change how you were eating to be healthier, or to lose weight?

George: Are you kidding? I've been on one diet after another for the past six years. I just never told you. Mostly I figured you'd disapprove of the diets. They aren't the ones your crowd recommends.

Natalie: What happened? Did any of them work?

George: They all worked — until they didn't. I'd lose 10, 15 pounds, and would feel pretty good about myself. And then I'd fall off the wagon, and have a cookie, or a piece of pie, and then it would be all over. And I'd feel so terrible about myself, I couldn't go back on the diet. So it would be another six months or so of gluttony before I'd need to buy another pants size or poke a new hole in my belt.

Natalie: Did you have any support when you went on the diets? From friends, Kristie, anyone?

George: Not really. I didn't tell my friends — who wants to hear about some guy's diet? When we ate out, I'd order like regular, because I didn't want them to see me being careful and restrictive. I'm still the life of the party.

Natalie: Did you try anything else to eat better?

George: Nah. I never believed in herbs or supplements, and I figured I just don't like vegetables. So there was no way I could succeed. I don't have your self-discipline. I wish I did.

Where's the opportunity in the problem?

Natalie: It's funny. I can't tell you the number of times in my life I've thought the same about you.

George: What do you mean?

Natalie: I was working in retail in my mid-20s, and you put yourself through college by working two jobs and going to community college at night. And you got good enough grades to transfer to State with a partial scholarship. I was so beat by the end of the day, I had no energy for anything but drive-through and a beer. I was so impressed by your work ethic.

George: Yeah, I've always been able to put in the hours. I'm doing it these days too — working 10-hour days as a comptroller for a company that sells European-styled cutlery online, not exactly my dream job. But food is a different story. That's where I have no self-control. I love to eat!

Getting a comprehensive list of past strategies on the table by asking if there was "anything else?" (chapter 20).

Natalie: I know. Well, mom was a good cook, even if she started phoning it in after dad died. When I changed my diet, the hardest things to give up were the comfort foods I associate with her: the 4-cheese Mac and cheese, the homemade stuffed shells, the fried chicken. I had lost the taste for them after about a month, but the emotional pull can still be strong.

George: Yeah. I don't know who I'd be if I ate health food all the time. I mean, I'd have to find some other hobby, right? 'Cause the rest of my life isn't exactly a barrel of monkeys.

Natalie: Yeah, that's what I discovered. I'd been using food to self-medicate my emotions. To get high in a legal and cheap and convenient way, so I wouldn't have to deal with yucky thoughts and feelings. And believe me, those thoughts and feelings were never far from the surface. It's a good thing junk food and candy are so cheap.

George: I'm tired of it. But I don't think I have the energy or the willpower to change.

Natalie: Let's have dinner. I admit, I made this lasagna so it would do the talking for me. It's mom's recipe, with a few modifications that I'm not going to reveal until you've tasted it.

George: Oh my gosh, this is incredible. The sauce is so good. What's that sweetness?

Natalie: Sorry, no can tell. I don't want to spoil your meal.

George: No, seriously. This is amazing. Are you saying it's good for me?

Natalie: OK, fine. The sweetness in the sauce comes from a little date paste. The lasagna is made with whole wheat noodles, spinach, zucchini, and roasted sweet potatoes.

George: What about the cheese? I thought you didn't use dairy?

Natalie: Well, I may have told a tiny lie about not using any tofu. The ricotta is actually tofu, lemon juice, and herbs and spices. And I used a store-bought plant-based mozzarella on top, just to fool you.

George: Well, I could eat like this.

Natalie: I thought so. You see, I don't exactly walk around in a hair shirt repenting for my sins all day long. I really love my food these days. The only difference is, it now loves me back.

Continues showing empathy and vulnerability (chapter 5).

OK, so this is a bit of a dirty trick. But one of the best ways to change other people is to model that change without making a big deal about it. So Natalie allows George to take the lead in talking about the meal. This is an example of helping the other person move from defensive to discovery mode (chapter 15).

Step 4: Plan

Identify Options

George: Can you give me this recipe?

Natalie: I can give you the whole cookbook, if you like. I've made several of the dishes from it, and they're all this good. And not too complicated or time-consuming.

George: I even think my kids would like this.

Natalie: Oh, I forgot - wait 'til you taste the Caesar dressing. I challenge you to guess what's in it.

George: Seriously, is there someone I can talk to about reversing this cardiovascular thing I've got? Someone who was in as bad shape as I am?

Natalie: Yes, I'm part of a Facebook group with hundreds of people who eat the way I do. I'll ask for volunteers. Would you like to talk to a cardiologist who now prescribes food and exercise first, and pills and procedures as a last resort? I met one at a health fair last year; she's a real sweet gal.

George: That would be great. You sure she's seen anyone as sick as me?

Natalie: She was on stage with a guy who became one of her patients; a guy in his early 50s, who had a heart attack at work, and died in the hospital later that same day. Several times, in fact, and was revived each time. He was so motivated after that, he found this doctor and now has a clean bill of health.

George: That's awesome. If I can love my food and get well, I'll do it.

Natalie: I've got a question. If you cut back on the junk food and super-rich food, what will you replace it with? Not in terms of calories, but pleasure. I don't want you to be super-depressed and low energy. That's a recipe for backsliding, like you found out.

George: I haven't made time for pleasure in a long time. Food's much more efficient.

Natalie: What could you try?

George: Don't laugh. I started going to country line dancing after Kristie and I split. I didn't think I'd like it,

Finding the opportunity in a dysfunctional habit (chapter 21).

A second set of options, about how to get pleasure from something other than food. Another instance of finding the opportunity in the problem of a dysfunctional habit (chapter 21).

but I did. It wasn't the dating scene I was hoping for, so I stopped going. But I admit - I really enjoyed doing the Macarena with somebody's grandmother.

Natalie: I love it. If you're not too embarrassed to be seen with me, I'd love to join you.

George: Sure. Wednesday nights in the middle school gym, on Hamlet's Chapel Road. Seven to nine pm.

Natalie: What else?

George: I can't think of anything.

Natalie: What about your band? Do you still play with Leonard and Marianne?

George: No, not in a while. We stopped rehearsing when the pandemic hit and all the gigs were cancelled.

Natalie: Would you enjoy that?

George: Maybe. Yes. But line dancing and rock and roll aren't the answer when I'm craving a donut or a cheeseburger.

Natalie: Yeah, I don't know exactly how you make that shift.

George: I wonder if your Lazarus guy can help me.

Choose

Natalie: Shall I put you in touch?

George: Yes, please. I'd love to talk to some people who've been through this, and a doctor who actually does it.

Natalie: Anything else?

George: I'd love to borrow that cookbook.

Natalie: Here — aren't the graphics awesome? I'll write down page numbers of my favorites.

Natalie: Anything else?

George: Let me start there. Oh, can I take home some leftovers?

Natalie: No.

George: No?

Natalie: I made two lasagnas. There's an unbaked one in

the fridge, that's all yours. Fifty-five minutes at 350 with the foil on, 15 minutes with the foil off. It's in the book.

George: You've been planning this?

Commit

Natalie: I don't know what you're talking about. Hey, would you be willing to give me another chance to help you? I promise, like really promise, not to be so annoying or judgmental. But I have learned a trick or two over the years, and if you have questions about anything, I would love to be on your culinary speed dial.

George: Sure. I'll call you after I talk to your peeps, to get some ideas for lunches that don't involve getting in the car and rolling down my window. Sound good?

Natalie: Sounds very good. I really care about you, you know that, right?

George: Yup, I can tell.