

Therapeutic Speech:

Avoiding the pitfalls of “toxic language”

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Objectives

- Recognize the impact of the spoken word on the individual.
- Define the term “toxic language” and give an example



Objectives, cont.

- Examine the impact of toxic language in the healing profession
- Analyze commonly utilized terminology for toxic components.



How we communicate...

- Facial gestures
- Body language
- Written communication
- Visual communication
- **VERBAL COMMUNICATION**



Toxic Language:

You need to know what it is if you want to modify your communication



Toxic Language: language or words that create affirmations, evoke emotional and/or physical responses, or alter perceptions *in a negative manner.*



“The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug...”

-Mark Twain



Examples of Toxic Language

- “This may *burn...*”
- “You may feel an *electric shock* down your *spine*”
- “It’s really *noisy* in the operating room”



Or worse-

- “This will feel like a *bee sting*”
- “You may have a sore throat”
- “That equipment is *broken again?!*”



- “The last patient that went to him ended up... dead, crippled, broke, pregnant, etc...”



“Can what we say really
matter...?”

The human language component



Everything that makes our
language unique (and us human)
flowed from the evolution of one
simple capacity:



the ability to impose a delay between a signal, a message, or an event that we experience - and our reaction or response to it.



Animal

Signal,
message, or
event



Response



Human (hopefully)

Signal,
message, or
event



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Response



We have the ability to wait for far longer periods of time than other species before responding.

This stems from our greater ability to inhibit immediate urges to respond, and because inhibition takes effort, waiting is not a passive act.



By inhibiting our urges to respond,
we give our brain time to split
incoming information into two parts:

- the *personal* meaning of the event (our feelings and emotional reactions)
- the *information* or content of the event

From *The Ascent of Man* by Dr. Jacob Bronowski (philosopher, physicist, and mathematician)



Being able to do this enables us to:



- separate emotion from information in our evaluation of events



- create a sense of past - and from it, a sense of the future



- talk to ourselves and use speech to control our own behavior



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- the information or content of the event



“Can what we say really matter...?”



The choice of words can paint mental pictures, change behaviors, and alter symptoms or sensations



Is your pain really bad?



Do you feel like vomiting?



How are your labor pains?



“Tech-Speak”

It's not that we
want to confuse our patient... or are
we hiding behind big words?



Tech speak, cont.

- Foley
- IV catheter
- PCA
- LIA
- Local anesthetic
- etc.



Not just the choice of word...
but the things you do with the noise
you make...



- Inflection
- Visual imagery
- Silence
- Repetition
- Mirroring



Why does it matter?

- Patient fears
- Built-in anxiety about treatments, findings, cost, inconvenience, etc.
- Loss of control
- Major life event
- Threat of loss or disfigurement
- Alien environment



The Patient as the Center of the Universe



Do patients really listen?

- Think of your own recent experience
- Eavesdropping out of self-preservation and boredom
- It seems to be human nature to think the worst



So what can we do....?

- Think before you speak
- Analyze your speech patterns- especially the ones you use every day
- Critique each other
- Think of more accurate, more precise ways of describing things



Finally...

- Listen a lot- not only to the words the patient is using, but what they're really trying to convey
- Avoid unnecessary noise, keep areas quiet and professional
- Use softer tones, avoid jargon, keep it simple without "talking down"



Let something appeal to us and we will make sense out of it. Let something offend us, disturb us, threaten us and we'll see that it doesn't make sense.

- Jule Eisenbud



You can say any fool thing to a dog,
and the dog will give you this look
that says, `My God, you're RIGHT! I
NEVER would've thought of that!'

Dave Barry - American humorist, author

