

THE POWER OF WORDS

By Rex C. Houze

As a child you probably heard and maybe even said, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.” That statement would probably be near the top of any list of childhood myths because the pain from hurtful words and phrases can be “felt” long after the pain from a stick or stone is gone.

Perhaps your life was shaped early on when you heard words and phrases from someone you loved such as, “You’re lazy...stupid...clumsy...(fill in the blanks). Or, “You’ll never amount to anything.” Perhaps you have some frayed relationships because of poor word choice either by you or the other person.

Certain words and phrases can be very inflammatory. Examples could include:

- YOU HAVE TO...(we don’t have a choice?)
- YOU SHOULD HAVE...(smacks of superiority); a better choice is “next time...”
- YOU ALWAYS...(chances are it’s only happened a few times); it’s better to be specific
- IT’S NOT MY FAULT (let’s fix the problem, not the blame)
- IT’S ALL YOUR FAULT (let’s fix the problem, not the blame)
- NOONE TOLD ME (let’s fix the problem, not the blame)
- THE FACT IS...(know-it-all attitude); better to say, “In my opinion...”
- EVERYONE KNOWS THAT...(know-it-all attitude); better to say, “2 or 3 people said...”
- IT’S CLEAR TO ME...(know-it-all attitude); better to say, “I’m beginning to wonder...”
- WHAT WERE YOU THINKING (put the emphasis on any word and it’s still bad); better to say, “Tell me about it” or “What happened” in non-judgmental tones.
- WHY IN THE WORLD...? (see previous comment)
- WHAT PART OF _____ DON’T YOU UNDERSTAND? (see comment two bullets up)
- BECAUSE I’M THE BOSS/DAD/MOM! (when you feel the need to use your perceived authority, you lose)

ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TO REDUCE THE TENSION IN YOUR RELATIONSHIPS:

1. Choose your words and phrasing carefully. Begin with the end in mind, e.g. what do you want the other person to think feel or do? What is your goal for this communication?
2. Choose your tone and inflection carefully and make certain your facial expressions and body language are congruent with your message.
3. Swing your “I/You Ratio” in favor of “You.”
 - Instead of “I will teach you...,” try “You will learn...”
 - Instead of “I enjoyed myself” try “You host a wonderful party.”
 - Instead of “I think..” try “What do you think?”

Use words and phrases that help not hurt, build relationships, encourage people, build them up, nurture personal and professional growth and help you achieve your goals.