

Posted in Weirs Times 02/2022

Watch your Language

by Leslie A. Gray, LCMHC, RYT

When I first started driving, my father told me that I was a defensive driver. At the ripe age of 16, I quickly drew an assumption that this was a criticism and leapt to defend myself. I explained that I felt nervous behind the wheel; I knew it was a big responsibility and wanted to avoid accidents; I'm not an aggressive person; I like to do things well... He let me rattle on for a minute or two, then stopped me and said, "No, it's a good thing. It means you are aware of your surroundings and are cautious." Phew! To this day, I pride myself on being defensive behind the wheel. But why did his use of that particular word have such a negative impact on me initially? It's because words have power.

We develop associations with words. Those associations form through our own experiences, or because of the view other people have on some thing or another. Our brain develops an opinion of words as a result. Even the way we say words has an impact one way or the other. Take a simple statement such as, "I'm going on vacation by myself." Notice what it's like to say it with annoyance, sadness, fear, excitement, disbelief, or pride. Even the tone, influx, and enunciation we use can change the way words can make us feel and how it is perceived by others.

Let's go deeper, literally. Take it down into your body and notice how certain words *feel* when you say, or even just think them. Your nervous system doesn't know the difference between thinking about something or actually doing it, so your body will react as if your thoughts and words are fact. It explains why watching scary movies is so... scary. Our heart beats faster, we tense up, our breathing changes. We are not telling our bodies to do this; it's just the natural physiological response our body has to the story our brain is telling it (or taking in). We might as well be in the movie ourselves.

At the start of the pandemic, we were encouraged to stay home because it was safer. However, many people translated this to, "We are in lock down." It was an exaggeration of the truth or reality (in NH). In the field of psychology, this is considered a cognitive distortion. In other words, it's an inaccurate description of what is really going on. Nonetheless, it added to a lot of anxiety and even panic for many folks.

Truth be told, I drove away from the grocery store twice out of fear of exposure. "I'll make do with what's in the cabinet today," I told myself as I drove away. I just couldn't convince my legs to step out of the vehicle and walk inside. But that isn't sustainable, so I had to figure out a way to get myself back in the grocery store. (This is where I'm going to lose a few of you but most of you will likely be able to relate.) I talked to myself. That's right. I sat in my truck in the parking lot at Hannaford's and had a very compassionate yet stern conversation with my inner fear. I reminded myself that I was wearing a mask, keeping my distance from others, washing my hands, (and at that time, my groceries when I got home... good grief). I talked to my inner fear like you might talk to a scared child with loving compassion. I told that part of myself that I'm doing everything I can within reason to be safe and healthy, but that not buying food was actually putting me at greater risk than going inside. I told myself that wearing a mask is probably exasperating my anxiety because it made it so hard to breathe and that feeling scared under all those circumstances was perfectly normal. And, I had to find a way to overcome my fears. And it worked.

I went on from there to talk with clients about their fears, sharing my own experience to help normalize their feelings. (Gosh, if a therapist is feeling this way, maybe it's not so abnormal.) I encouraged people to keep it real and replace, "We are in lockdown," with, "We are safer at home." And you know what? Not only did that feel better to say, but people actually said it made them feel more in control; more empowered. Staying home became a personal choice in response to a world tragedy vs. an order from our government.

So, watch your language. Your body believes the story your mind is telling it. So be honest. More importantly, be accurate. Don't exaggerate. Mind your tone. Then reap the benefits of keeping it real.

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