

Running Head: WORDS CAN HURT

Words can hurt, but

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Abstract

Having a conscience and the ability to communicate verbal or non-verbal messages gives humans a great deal of power to express a broad range of emotions. We can then demonstrate our feelings to make an impression on the lives of those around us. Fortunately, our personal skills and available technological resources allow us to enhance lives and create a fulfilled life for ourselves, if we so wish. However, we also have the potential to make others feel as if they do not have a worthwhile place in society. In particular, we can use words to dishonor them. In researching this paper I sought to gain more insight into the minds of people who choose to bully and to remind people that thoughtless remarks don't just erase smiles or dull temperaments. They can cause lingering damage internally and externally. I would like to highlight the grave effects of repetitive insensitive comments on one's emotions and stress the importance of creating welcoming environments.

A few years ago, in an effort to help my English Language Learners adopt a strategy to help them recall grammatical rules and common English expressions, I created a quote, “Repeat, repeat, repeat ... remember, remember, remember.” I explained that if we produced different opportunities in and outside the classroom to employ these examples, then they would start to use them more naturally and obtain confidence in their ability to convey their thoughts in English. When I chose the topic for this paper, I was reminded of my quote. I felt that it was applicable because if insulting and cutting words are repeatedly directed at someone they will be easily recalled and will begin to scar. It is highly likely that the force with which they are uttered will also be remembered and this might lead a person to believe that the labels truly belong to him or her.

During my recent class PowerPoint presentation on “Words Can Hurt,” I showed a slide that contained a list of twenty encouraging adjectives. These descriptive words had been sourced from my professor and classmates. The adjectives included *empathetic*, *selfless*, *encouraging*, *enthusiastic*, and *delightful*. The last one was *valuable*. I asked someone in the class to read the list aloud. After the words had been read, I asked how everyone felt. One classmate said that she felt great. Another responded with, “Wonderful.” Everyone was smiling and some faces were even beaming. I also detected pride within the room. I explained that I was going to do an exercise with those words.

At the beginning of the exercise, I played a recording of me reading the list of the twenty words. As the fifth word was being read, my classmates and professor could hear me starting to read a list of antonyms for the words. They heard me read an antonym for each of the twenty heartening words. Both lists of words were being read at the same pace, so that a combination of

complimentary and derogatory words could be heard. At the end of the recording, the only words that could be heard were the uncomplimentary ones. They were *dull, awkward, useless, apathetic, repulsive* and finally, *worthless*. The last word was said with indifference and vehemence.

After this exercise, I scanned the room to see the reactions. I observed a sea of despondent faces. The room lacked spirit. Gone was the previous confidence evident from the delivery of the inspiring words read alone. When I asked how everyone felt, nobody uttered a word; nobody had to, as smiles had been replaced by expressionless faces. Personally, when I had created this exercise, I had put myself in the shoes of an innocent bullied victim. It was possible that my professor and classmates had visualized a similar scenario.

My classmates and professor knew that no malice was meant when they were asked to listen to unflattering words that could have been used to describe them if I were a person intent on making them feel downtrodden. However, when insulting words are repeatedly targeted at people with increased intensity by others wanting to cause harm, the results can be toxic and can cause emotional damage. Quite often the effects are never forgotten and they can result in a person contemplating or even carrying out suicide when no alternative direction is foreseeable.

At this point, I believe that it is important to describe some of the effects of cruel comments and verbal abuse on the brain. Moreover, I would like to stress how gratifying it can be to live in environments that include compassionate and supportive people.

In her book, Learning & Memory - The Brain in Action, Marilee Sprenger writes, "... the single most dynamic influence on the brain's chemistry may be positive feedback." Her book gives valuable information on how people's brains are affected by uncaring behavior. In support of this, Robert Sylvester, an Emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Oregon known

for his research and literature on educational neuroscience, notes that, “Positive feedback, which comes in many different forms, is essential for the development of a good self-concept and healthy self-esteem.” (1995)

Briefly, Marilee Sprenger writes that the natural drugs serotonin, dopamine, and endorphin make the body feel good, aid the immune system, and help in transmitting messages easily and quickly. Positive interactions will allow the brain to release these “feel good” chemicals (Jensen, 2005). However, these natural drugs can also create imbalances in our system, depending on how they interact with each other. It is vital, therefore, to have a natural chemical balance for us to feel good about ourselves. We are able to partly manage our own levels of these chemicals and we can also affect others' levels. A feeling of contentment can quickly disappear with offensive words from someone, monumental disturbing events, or other worrying events in a person's life. For example, when a person has low self-esteem or depression, the level of serotonin may be lowered. This lack of serotonin appears to keep many individuals “trapped” in the emotional areas of their brains.

The natural chemical cortisol (a stress-related substance) has some positive effects at low levels but at high levels it can be very toxic to the brain and body. The hypothalamus, an area of the brain that controls such things as hunger, sleep, thirst, sex drive, and moods, calls for the release of cortisol when the brain feels threatened. Chronic stress causes the cortisol to be released at high levels that can harm certain brain structures, interrupt transmission of messages from neuron to neuron, and result in immune, circulatory, and digestive problems. Along with adrenaline, cortisol aids in the “flight or fight” response (LeDoux, 1996). We don't know whether to face our fears or flee from them. Our stress responses cannot differentiate between emotional and physical danger and we cannot always react in a way that is beneficial to our

health. Constant attacks on a person's personality can affect how he or she sees himself/herself. When a person is not accepted in certain groups, picked on, and threatened continually, it affects how his or her brain reacts. If the abuse intensifies, some people begin to be persuaded that they are less essential than others. It is my conviction that if a greater population is aware of the brain's chemistry and how it can be used to protect itself, then the circles of cruel people, if they still exist, will have less domination over their victims. They would be up against more educated and assertive targets.

Also in Learning & Memory - The Brain in Action, Marilee Sprenger notes that there are five memory lanes through which we learn. These are semantic, episodic, procedural, automatic, and emotional. Semantic memory holds information learned from words. Most classroom situations rely heavily on this memory lane. Episodic memory deals with locations. The important link here is that you are always somewhere when you learn something. Procedural memory deals with processes that the body does and remembers, like riding a bike or driving a car. Automatic memory is often referred to as conditioned response as certain stimuli automatically trigger your memory like a song or a scent. Emotional memory is the most powerful memory as the brain gives priority to emotions.

The emotional memory takes precedence over any other kind of memory. It may be triggered by another memory lane, but it can take over the logical mind and can lead to irrational behavior. The emotional memory is like a filing cabinet containing documents with all the information about experiences that make people happy or sad. If this lane has continuous disparaging remarks directed towards it, it begins to have dominance over other memory lanes.

Despite the emotional memory lane being the strongest, the most effective learning comes from utilizing all five lanes. If numerous memory lanes are being targeted in the learning

process, people have more opportunities to connect with instruction, absorb knowledge, and comprehend what is being taught. For example, if teachers coach to and provide assessments on the same memory lane they will miss possible connections with students who favor the ignored memory lanes. I believe that if more students have their minds occupied in schools and are engaged in activities that suit their memory lanes, there would be fewer aggressive people who long to direct their vindictive behavior on people they perceive as different from them. A vital point that Marilee Sprenger makes is that we teach different individuals in a classroom. "No two have come to you with the same backgrounds, the same experiences, or the same desires. No two have come with the same dendritic growth, myelination, or lobe development. They have all come with the same need to learn and remember and it is important for them to be instructed in a style that suits them." Being more aware of the reasons for our individuality and dynamic differences might make people more tolerant of each other's traits. On the other hand, if people are victims of destructive actions that originate from different memory lanes, they will have more examples to recall and the effects will most likely be more intense. Having knowledge about the brain's chemistry and the five memory lanes is vital. Knowing the effects of both encouragement and discouraging behavior can strengthen victims' defense against bullying.

W. Penn Handwerker, professor of anthropology at the University of Connecticut, cautions that hurtful words can haunt you all your life and may lead to heart disease, depression, stress, suicide, or even the aggression witnessed in the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado. He says that the words that come from people who can influence your life such as teachers and parents or peers you admire can have permanent effects and negatively impact your quality of life.

April 20, 2010 marked the eleventh anniversary of the Columbine High School shootings. According to an article on <http://www.usatoday.com/news>, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two teenagers responsible for the shootings, had two different personalities, but they were united in their “over-the-top revenge fantasy against years of snubs, slights, and cruelties, real and imagined.” Dave Cullen, author of Columbine, writes that one of Harris' last journal entries read: "I hate you people for leaving me out of so many fun things. And no don't ... say, 'Well that's your fault,' because it isn't, you people had my phone #, and I asked and all, but no. No no no don't let the weird-looking Eric KID come along." Cullen adds that as Eric walked into the school the morning of April 20, his T-shirt read: *Natural Selection*.

Peter Langman, author of Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters, writes that Dylan Klebold was anxious and lovelorn, summing up his life at one point in his journal as "the most miserable existence in the history of time." “Eric Harris drew swastikas in his journal; Klebold drew hearts. As laid out in their writings, there was a stark contrast between the boys. Harris seemed to feel superior to everyone — he once wrote, "I feel like God and I wish I was, having everyone being OFFICIALLY lower than me" — while Klebold was suicidally depressed and paranoid and became angrier all the time. "Me is a god, a god of sadness," he wrote in September 1997, around his 16th birthday.” He also wrote, "I have always been hated, by everyone and everything." On the day of the massacre, his T-shirt read: *Wrath*.

In his book, Langman profiles ten shooters and includes Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. He found that nine suffered from depression and suicidal thoughts, which he says is a "potentially dangerous" combination. "It is hard to prevent murder when killers do not care if they live or die. It is like trying to stop a suicide bomber." The boys had hoped to kill thousands that day at school, but killed thirteen and injured twenty-three.

Bruce D. Perry writes in his article, *Violence in Words* that “Emotions can change rapidly for a number of reasons that can come from within a person, or be caused from an exterior force ... Exterior forces can arrive in the form of bad news, an impromptu disagreement or argument, a negative comment that is given on a personal level, or an off-color comment ... When emotions plummet into negativity due to someone else’s negative comments or personal attacks, it physically hurts because those words are causing alterations in your brain.” In the case of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, their not being accepted in social circles contributed to their violence. Perry comments that if someone lashes out at a person with angry words, it cuts more deeply than if someone is making jokes about you for different reasons. “Words can be used to dehumanize, ... [which] can be lethal.” He writes that there is more verbal violence than gun violence in schools. If words are used to isolate and put down any individual or group, an atmosphere of hate is created. Violence can then be unleashed and regrettably this can lead to killing. He notes that two particularly horrific periods in our history, slavery and the Holocaust, began with hateful beliefs and persecution of innocent people who were classified as different from the accusers.

Perry suggests ways like using other words to protect yourself, having the thoughtless words bounce off of you, or confiding in a trusted friend or adult who will give supportive words to make you feel more valued and loved. However, it is up to all individuals to choose their words and think about the effects they might have on other people. To Perry, tolerance of people’s differences is vital and with that comes respect. Sadly, not all people care how people react to their verbal or physical aggression.

While it is important to acknowledge people’s differences and not judge unfairly, it is also crucial to prevent other people’s uncaring behavior from affecting the well-being of people

who might become victims. A person's individuality should be respected, if in turn, that person respects another individual's beliefs and lifestyle and if he or she aims to create an environment free from hostility, prejudice, and ridicule.

In his article, *Do Words and the Rest of our Behavior Affect Each Other?* Robert Ian Scott comments on MIT professor Steven Pinker's quote that "... we produce language as spiders spin webs, as the result of some instinct." Professor Pinker points out that spiders spin webs alone, without needing to see another web. He admits that humans need to hear words before they learn to use them and notes that "we learn to speak as a part and product of our responses to social situations; words matter to us because they signal and affect what we sense, think, and do." If only bullies could take note of a spider's objectives in spinning webs. I don't consider that bullies commonly attack alone. If they target certain people and act differently towards them, they could do so as members of a particular group or with an army of followers to help instill their venom. If they do work individually, I still don't believe that they are alone because they most likely have their own "divided" personalities scheming with them. Currently, in Massachusetts, there are nine students who have been charged with contributing to the death of the teenager, Phoebe Nora Mary Prince (11/24/1994 – 01/14/2010), who was a student at South Hadley High School, in Massachusetts. Their inexhaustible bullying acts carried out face-to-face, via text, on the phone, and through the Internet wore Phoebe down until she felt her only alternative was silence. This silence translated into her choice of escape, *death*.

In his article, Scott also writes that statements, (again, words are selected as the method of persecution) – particularly those that start with 'you' – are a factor that contribute to increasing rates of depression in the U.S. and often lead to serious health problems, especially for

women. He affirms, “Words and acts become chronic stressors when a child hears them regularly.”

On March 18, 2010, The Massachusetts House of Representatives unanimously approved a bill that seeks to curtail bullying in schools and in cyberspace. David Abel, in his Boston Globe article, “Bullying Act OK’d in House, 148-0 Advocates Praise Late Change in Measure,” states that the bill defines bullying, in part, as “the repeated use by a perpetrator of a written, verbal, or electronic expression, or physical act or gesture ... directed at a victim that causes physical or emotional harm or damage to the victim’s property; places the victim in reasonable fear or harm to himself or of damage to his property; [or] creates a hostile environment at school.” If principals determine that the bullying constitutes a criminal act, they would be required to report the incident to law enforcement. House lawmakers and senators invoked the deaths of 15-year-old Phoebe Prince from South Hadley and Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, 11, (4/19/1997 – 4/6/2009) of Springfield, who committed suicide after allegedly being bullied in separate incidents over the last fifteen months. “This bill aims to secure our students from bullying, both during the school day and after school hours,” House Speaker Robert A. DeLeo said in a statement. It is important to note that the bill has language that requires school officials — bus drivers, cafeteria workers, teachers, and others — to report any act of bullying to the school’s principal. I believe that this is a crucial step in the right direction and coupled with important lessons on how we can use our brains, bodies, and support services to combat attacks from bullying, our armor will be strengthened.

The Centers for Disease Control (<http://www.teensuicidestatistics.com>) reports that suicide is the third leading cause of death behind accidents and homicide, of people aged 15 to 24 and for children between 10 and 14, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death. The most

common factor leading to a teenager's suicide is depression. This depression can be triggered by such factors as the divorce of parents, violence in the home, feelings of worthlessness, rejection by friends or peers, or feelings of being trapped in a life that one can't handle. Bullying, particularly with malicious words, contributes to these factors.

In two interviews conducted by the editor of iParenting, Donna Smith, a former bully, Troy, and a number of people who had been victims of bullying, were interviewed. Three statements from those articles stood out for me. Troy, the past-bully said that he tormented the smartest kid in school, who was just as big as Troy. He ended up beating him to a bloody pulp. Troy commented that the boy never recovered emotionally and dropped out of school because of the shame. He said that the boy still talks about it." The second statement was a comment made by Heather, a woman from Texas who had been bullied. She said, "...one thing I will regret forever ... If I had fought back, it would have stopped." The third declaration was Troy's quote that "Things such as honor and integrity are what makes man a man. I changed when I realized that. Also, people started liking me more and I liked myself more when I used my mind and not my fists." Fortunately, Troy was able to change his behavior and discard his callous ways.

After a person experiences a particular situation, he or she can then appreciate how a similar experience might feel for another person. As an undergraduate student, I failed English and History during my first year of university. I had come from a small country town in New South Wales, Australia, and when I started studying my Bachelor of Arts Degree at the University of Sydney, I was a naïve seventeen year-old student, who had never lived in a large city. Regarding my tertiary studies, I realized that I had a great deal to learn about researching and managing ever-increasing workloads.

When I returned to the university without much confidence following the summer vacation, I repeated those classes I had failed. I also took a third class. I worked diligently and after I had finished my exams, I was anxious to receive my grades, even though I knew I might have to wait up to six weeks for them. Before they were due to arrive, I received a letter from a university friend who had been in the history class that I had repeated. One professor had taught both classes and he knew my friend and I well. My friend had written, "I have it on good authority that you received a pass in history," I was ecstatic to read this news. I later found out that I had passed my other two classes. Knowing that I could face my parents, brothers, and friends with such good news was overwhelming. In February, the following year, I returned to classes with renewed confidence and continued with my degree.

At the end of that year, when my future sister-in-law and a friend failed a class each, I was able to offer solace and reassuring words because I had been through the same experience. Fortunately, both women completed their degrees. By my third year there were content connections within my linguistics, philosophy of education, and English classes. My direction was more focused and when I graduated, it was only one year later than originally expected.

I have told many students about this setback in my undergraduate education and I think that their knowledge of my experience has helped them realize that while success is not within reach at one point in your life, it can be attainable under different circumstances.

In searching for quotes that could support my conviction in the potency of kind words, I found three from Mother Teresa (1910 – 1997), founder of the Order of the Missionaries of Charity, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, 1979, and a noble, selfless human being.

"Kind words are short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless."

"The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of

being unwanted.”

“I believe that much hatred for their victims must exist within bullies that I wonder what people or things they love.”

Caring words can partially remedy tormented lives, while uncaring words can intensify existing anguish. We have the power to communicate many emotions that make impressions on people’s lives. In this paper, I have demonstrated how this strength can have beneficial or detrimental outcomes by providing research on the importance of educating people about the brain’s reactions, demonstrating how teaching to the different memory lanes can affect a person’s responses to learning, listing examples of events that can lead people to suicide, and presenting reasons why people assault with words. Perhaps if words of praise were more prevalent in our society, people could accept them graciously and acknowledge that this behavior is commendable. Possibly, people could encourage themselves and others and prevent themselves from absorbing the harsh words.

There are many reasons why people decide to use words that wound. Those who use these words and display injurious behavior could likely be victims of similar acts themselves. They might not understand or want to understand that they possess skills that can enhance rather than destroy people’s lives. If we are able to educate people about the importance of eliminating merciless actions and language, then perhaps we will be successful at convincing them that words ... *can also heal*.

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