

Those Three Little Words—Why They Count

Council for
Public Interest
in Anesthesia



Sandra Tunajek, CRNA, DNP
CPIA Consultant

In today's healthcare environment we hear much about the importance of communication. Recent studies have shown that miscommunication in among healthcare workers can lead to disastrous results, including litigation.¹ The 2000 report of the Institute of Medicine (IOM)² attributed the high level of fatal mistakes in hospitals directly to miscommunication or a failure to communicate.

Miscommunication occurs when others do not communicate enough information to us, or we misinterpret the real meaning of their words. In either case, we get a different meaning of their words than they intended.

We know that communication is vital to any healthy relationship and is the basis for both personal and workplace dialogue. Language, the use of words, provides the foundation for human interaction and the tools for understanding and solving problems. Communication enhances our emotional well-being and involves listening and thinking as well as talking.

Every encounter between two or more humans is a communication event. Research indicates everyone converses differently. Individual communication style is shaped by the family and culture we are born into and is influenced by what we learn from family and peers. These factors determine how we communicate our own needs or handle conflict, express feelings, hear others, and express love and affection.

There are many things that we can do to strengthen our interpersonal relationships at home and in the workplace. Most involve effective communication that builds on active listening, giving and receiving criticism, dealing with different personality types, and nonverbal communication. Further, communication incorporates our personal forms of expression, be it facial expression, or body language, or the actual words.

Words can be of different forms and may be small, but have immense power to brighten up relationships.³ Some words are inexhaustible. They can be said a billion times and never lose their power or the ability to deeply touch another person. It is impossible to wear them out. Words, when spoken or conveyed by gesture or attitude, can have the power to forge new friendships, deepen old ones, and restore relationships that are threatened.

Words can create entirely different emotions when used in differing contexts or when heard with different meaning than which they were offered. The words we speak in an unguarded moment or without thinking reveals much about ourselves. Our words have the power to damage other lives. Words can make us feel wretched, deeply saddened, angry, and ashamed.

Letting others know in so many little ways that you understand them is one of the most effective and powerful mechanisms for any relationship. People become closer and enjoy each other more if they feel the other person accepts and understands them. Too many of us regret withholding these little words from someone who well deserved to hear them, but who was gone from our lives before we could ever tell them.

Three Powerful Little Words

Certainly the three little words, *I love you* that one expects to hear on Valentine's Day, should be reserved for those who are very special and cherished. More importantly, they should not be delegated to one day a year. Scientists believe that feelings of love act as the emotional mortar that binds people to one another in spite of changing circumstances. Having a loving relationship with your children, family members, and your partner strengthen those bonds. You feel grateful to them for being in your life and seek to do what you can do for them. In turn they will do the same for you.

Many other combinations of three little words also have great impact. They are gifts of appreciation, love, and admiration. They are words that bind together all those they touch—words that enhance relationships and build respect and tolerance—words that promote being emotionally well. Emotional wellness is typically defined as possessing the ability to feel and express human emotions and having a sense of fulfillment in life, including the capacity to engage in empathetic communication.

Although there may be differences in the ways that individuals experience affection, love, and caring, scientists have shown that the capacity to care for others exists in the human genome and is encoded for self-awareness, empathy, and language. Further, empathy offers the capacity to understand and respond to the unique experiences of another and psychologists have found that shared experience and similarity between people help to build empathic accuracy.⁴ Communication becomes the process of sharing our ideas, thoughts, and feelings with other people and having those ideas, thoughts, and feelings understood by the people we are talking with.

Through the power of communication, we speak, listen, and observe. Our lives are a series of conversations and to communicate with ease we must gain each other's attention, demonstrate empathy, and be willing to engage in emotional intelligence.

Being there for another person is one of the greatest gifts we can give. Saying *I'll be there and you can count on me* is being truly present for other people. These words express loyalty, an emotional attachment for family and friends. It is an essential ingredient for true love and friendship and restores us emotionally and spiritually. You see a need and try to fill it. You do what you can to heal a hurt, without being asked.

Respect is another way of showing you care. Respect conveys the feeling that the other person is a true equal. Showing or saying *I*

respect you is a powerful way to affirm the importance of a relationship. **I miss you** is a powerful affirmation that tells people they are wanted, needed, and cared for.

Maybe you're right is highly effective in restoring frazzled emotions. It offers the humility of admitting maybe you are wrong in your arguments. Many broken relationships could be restored and healed if people would admit their mistakes and ask for forgiveness. Saying **please forgive me** recognizes our vulnerabilities to faults and failures.

People who enjoy the companionship of good, close friends are those who do not take things for granted. They are quick to say **I thank you** and show a sense of gratitude and appreciation for their friends for their many expressions of kindness.

Many friends and family members have careers, unique or unusual interests, and hobbies. Support them in pursuing their interests and encourage their uniqueness. A simple **go for it** shows support and urges them to pursue their dreams.

Do not worry. In today's uncertain world, we need to cherish each moment and not be absorbed by the negatives, the "what ifs" or any anxiety of what we might experience in the future. Today's trouble is enough for today. Not only is worry and anxiety a nonproductive use of time and energy, as well as being detrimental to our emotional, spiritual, and physical health, it may also be at the core of poor decision making, missed opportunity, and the creation of additional anxiety.

When Communication Goes Awry

Language is inherently ambiguous because all ordinary words are allowed many meanings, depending on the context. Words can create feelings of joy, love, closeness, gratitude, and happiness. Your words can console, comfort, inspire, motivate, elevate. But other words can create feelings of pain, distress, and anger.

The problem is that we make judgments about people, usually based on the way that they speak, and we may unconsciously come to believe things about that person's character and motives. Further, in today's diverse cultural patterns, what things can be said, how they should be said, and to whom they can be said, differ dramatically. The resulting mismatches in expectations can all too frequently lead to suspicion and anger.

Often miscommunication can be described in the form of habits and in such behaviors as failure to listen where you may only hear words and not the emotions or feelings behind them. Listening is a learned skill. It takes effort and concentration. You may not listen fully or your mind may wander. You may be misled by words and meanings you don't understand. Remember it isn't only the words,

but how they're said that determines the message. When you try to understand someone else's feelings, listening helps that person make sense of his or her experience. It also helps that person find better answers, even when you're not giving advice. Paying attention to emotions and feelings can help you better understand the other person. Remember that it is human nature to hear faster than we speak. If you are too busy thinking up an answer, you may not hear the question.

Have you ever tried to communicate with someone who already has their mind made up? **A closed mind** is very difficult to overcome when regardless of what you say, they only hear what they want to hear. One of the most important parts of communication is the effort to understand the other person's point of view. Whether the topic is happy or contentious, it can be very helpful to try to understand what the other person is feeling.

On another hand, being quick to **jump to conclusions** can also be problematic. Do you sometimes hear what you want to hear rather than what is said? If you feel strongly about a subject, you may hear only the part of the conversation that agrees with you. Wait to hear the entire conversation before responding.

Most importantly, do not be quick to **make snap judgments.** Pay attention to others and what they are saying verbally as well as through body language. Emotion is communicated in facial expressions, body movements, body language, tone of one's voice, pace of words, and intensity.

There is a science to our words. Learning how to apply that science is the key to effective skills that promote accurate and respectful ways of communicating and prevent costly miscommunication and time-consuming misunderstanding.

When you choose the right words, effective communication is a shared awareness, a level of shared identity and being connected to others. People with good emotional health are aware of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They have learned healthy ways to communicate, to cope with the stress and problems that are a normal part of life.

Relationships can be both cultivated and stifled by words. Make it a habit to become aware of the language and the words you use when conversing with others...especially with our families, friends, and colleagues.

References

1. Bodenheimer T. Coordinating Care: A perilous journey through the healthcare system. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 2008; 358:1064-1071.
2. Kohn L, Corrigan J, Donaldson M, Eds. *To Err Is Human: Building a Safer Health System*. 2000. Institute of Medicine.
3. Bowling J. *A Way with Words*. 1999. Beacon Hill Press. Kansas City.
4. Ickes W. *Empathic Accuracy*. 1997. The Guildford Press, New York NY.

Words are voices of the heart.

Confucius