

WHO'S KIDDING WHOM: WORDS DO HARM
By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Like a popular sign says, “most of the wisdom we learned in kindergarten” is advice we can truly count on. However, whoever coined the phrase "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" must have been kidding. If they were serious, they had a chronic case of defensive denial! During this holiday season, it is easy to become overwhelmed with the stress of preparations, shopping, visitors, entertaining, etc. As frustration and stress increases, this is an especially critical time for monitoring how we treat the people we love. One of the nicest gifts we can give to others is to pay special attention to what we say and how we say it.

Just retrieve personal memories of growing up and you'll know without a doubt, words did hurt and still do. As children, many of us were emotionally injured when another kid poked fun at us. If a significant adult made fun or criticized us when we tried something new and failed, it was even worse---we were devastated. As sharp words continued to be aimed our way during childhood, what did we do to survive their injuries? In order to save ourselves from being severely and emotionally wounded, we tried many things: we abandoned the things we liked; we ignored the desire to try new things; we did only what we imagined other people would approve of; etc. In short, we learned to avoid risking humiliation and embarrassment that was triggered by the ill-tempered words of others. In truth, according to nationally known coach Linda Dominguez, this old-fashioned phrase should be re-written to read, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will

diminish my self-esteem and infect me with the *disease to please*," a phrase borrowed from Oprah Winfrey.

As children, when we attempted to take an adult's counsel, we learned to act as if their harsh words didn't faze us. We became adept at denying or ignoring our hurt feelings on the outside, becoming emotionally crippled on the inside. Fortunately, with the freedom of adulthood, we gain more options for managing harsh and critical words that are spoken to us. So, whether you're on the sending end or receiving end of hurtful words, it's time, as an adult, to focus on improving your personal standards. There is no better time to make some changes in your relationship with others than during the holidays. First, consider the way you treat other people and second, strengthen your psychological boundaries (how you let other people treat you). *These two tasks are twins: you can't do one without the other.*

Set Psychological Boundaries

When setting personal boundaries, remember to speak up BEFORE you become angry with the sender of the verbal message and what they're saying. You might respond to the sender in a non-judgmental way by saying, "Wow, that sounded like an insult -- how about rephrasing it so we can continue this conversation?" Remember to give no argument, no challenge, and no charge in your voice when you speak. Your purpose is to allow the sender to understand that digs and cracks, no matter how subtle, are just not ok with you.

In order to set standards for your own behavior, it will be crucial for you to become aware of your impact on others. Pay attention to how your words and actions affect others. Empathize, by giving some thought to what you are going to say, and listening to and watching other people as they respond to you. When an individual requests you rephrase a statement, don't react with an angry putdown. Stop, count to 10, calm down, reflect, and respond. Your response may include a statement denying your intention to insult (i.e. "I'm sorry - I didn't mean to insult you -- what I really wanted to say is...."). Statements that imply the listener is wrong (i.e. "I'm sorry you feel that way." or "Stop being so sensitive!" or even, "get over it") lack responsibility and maturity and will only serve to intensify the problem or conflict. Stay clear on your ultimate intent---to communicate; not hurt.

Take time this holiday season to set standards of behavior that will strengthen your ability to understand others: become attentive to emotional cues; listen well with your ears to words that are spoken, as well as those left unsaid; see with warm eyes and an open, forgiving heart. Learn how you can show sensitivity and understanding about the perspectives needs and feelings of others. And remember, words do hurt, so choose them very, very carefully.

Self-Care

In addition to treating others with care, begin to treat yourself in a kinder way. Set strong boundaries and standards to increase your personal competence. By learning to manage

your life and yourself, how you deal with stress, how aware you are of yourself and others, and how skilled you are at inducing desirable responses in others, you will dramatically improve your sense of self-efficacy. And remember, improving personal competence builds self-esteem, reflects wisdom, knowledge, fortitude and kindness. It's a highly attractive personal quality and it's a cure for the "disease to please." It's absolutely curable -- with personal work and a strong commitment to change.

For more information on this topic, consider the literature from 12-Step programs on Co-Dependency. Melody Beattie's book, Co-Dependent No More, is an excellent resource.

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