The Power of Language

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Disclosures

- None
Intended to Invite Intention & Attention – Rather than Agreement
Objectives

- Create a social, political, medical & ethical context to frame language & empower clinicians to assume control over word choice.
- Relate physical & cognitive reactions to verbal & non-verbal expression.
- Link cognitive distortions & attributed meanings to common language used in health care, decision making, communication & documentation.
- Discuss benefits & risks of metaphor, language which sets expectation, delegitimitizes, builds or joins ideas & persons.
- Distinguish how language can potentially create confusion, foster inaccuracy &/or complicate communications.
- Introduce ideas such as “therapy first” & “person first” language to enhance word choice & mitigate harms.
How We Speak about our Work has Social & Political Ramifications Messaging & Anchoring
“Words not only convey something, but are something; that words have color, depth, texture of their own, & the power to evoke vastly more than they mean; that words can be used not merely to make things clear, make things vivid, make things interesting; but to make things happen inside the one...who hears them.”

Frederick Buechner
100% Control of What We Speak & Write

Amy Herman, 2015
What May be Useful for Us & Others – A Sampling to Deconstruct Spoken or Written
Develop a Vigilance & Notice

- Body & mind
  - Breathing
  - Thoughts....Internal dialogue
  - Tensions

- Communication
  - Verbal & other....sighs
  - Between & among clinicians, patients & families
Listen for Cognitive Distortions
ours & others

- Personalization
- Depersonalizing
- All or nothing thinking
- Catastrophizing
Clues to All or Nothing Thinking

- Always
- Never
- Everything
- Every

- None
- Everyone/No one
- All
- All the time
Personalization

- Taking responsibility beyond our control
  - Death ~ Letting go, giving up, stop fighting
    - Simplify the mysterious
    - Cause & effect vs uncertainty
    - Dying as a matter of will
    - Allow Natural Death
    - Unfinished business
  - If your heart stops do you want us to bring you back?
Personalization

“If she did not fail the chemotherapy, then I failed”

Oncology MD Fellow
A Hallway Conversation
Depersonalizing

- Identifying person with....
  - Disease ~ Addict, sickler
  - Status ~ DNR
  - Medical constructs ~ Case
  - 3\textsuperscript{rd} person referencing
  - "Progressing through treatment"
  - Salvage chemo
  - Body part .....
What Does Catastrophizing Sound Like

- Catastrophizing – exaggerate an event to its most fearful – imagine the worst possible outcome & react as if it will surely come true
  - Resuscitation
  - Pound on the chest
  - Break ribs ~ informed consent
  - Torture, inhumane
Attributed Meaning

- Pulling the plug
- Hang a morphine drip
- “I did the morphine thing”
- Goals of care
- Comfort care
Attributed Meaning

- Political, Social & Spiritual Impacts
  - Physician aid / assisted ...death/suicide
  - Lethal medication...dose
  - Terminal...palliative...extubation
  - Death with dignity
  - Suffering
  - Narcotics
  - Hospice as “industry”
Attributed Meaning

- Complicating decision making
  - Feeding tube; Children & others
  - Withdrawing life-sustaining treatment
    - Brain death
  - Comfort care - build fluidity & specificity
    - Rxs continues, added or discontinued & why

- Challenges to personhood
  - Vegetative
  - Harvesting organs
Metaphor

- Congruity with self?
- Validates one as part of a group
  - Survivor
  - Warrior
  - Fighter
  - Victim
- Journey
Metaphor

My point is that illness is not a metaphor & that the most truthful way of regarding illness - & the healthiest way of being ill - is the one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking. Yet it is hardly possible to take up one’s residence in the kingdom of ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped. (Sontag, 1978)
Metaphor

In fact, metaphors may be as necessary to illness as they are to literature, as comforting to the patient as his own bathrobe & slippers. At the very least they are a relief from medical terminology. Perhaps only metaphor can express the bafflement, the panic combined with beatitude of the threatened person. (Broyard, 1992)
Language as Expectation & Suggestion

- Decision making ~ focus on the negative
  - DNR - DNAR
  - Withholding (foregoing) ~ withdrawing
  - There is nothing I can do for you
  - Do you want everything done
  - No more treatment
  - Failed extubation, treatment, speech & swallow
  - Offer ... Candidate for ...
**As vs When vs IF**

**As implies** + expectation & process over time

- As you become more & more relaxed
- As your pain decreases.....

**When implies** after, future, waiting

- When you become relaxed

**If implies** doubt & uncertainty

- If you become more relaxed
- Challenge vs positive expectation
Delegitimation

- the withdrawal of legitimacy, usually from some institution such as a state, cultural practice, etc. which may have acquired it explicitly or implicitly, by statute or accepted practice.
Delegitimation

A Narrative Review of the Impact of Disbelief in Chronic Pain

(B.J. Newton et al, 2013)

- Explore the social context in which individuals experience disbelief
- Key results integrate to form three main themes
Themes Captured

- **Stigma** - through actual or perceived encounters
  - Psychological explanation of pain
  - Perceived challenge to integrity & thereby affect identity
  - May be influenced by negative female stereotypes
- The experience of *isolation* consequent to loss of relationships & being disbelieved – may be self initiated
- Disbelief can lead to *emotional distress* – guilt, depression, anger
Delegitimizing...

- Context in which individuals experience disbelief & or challenge to identity
  - Claims to be in pain
  - Likes the Percocet
  - Clock watcher
  - Drug seeking/relief seeking
  - Doesn’t get it
  - In denial
Requires rather than Uses

Requires – Has need of
- 49 yo female, stage IV lung cancer requires 60 mg oxycontin to manage pain

Uses – Habit, routine, custom
- 49 yo female with stage IV lung cancer uses 60 mg oxycontin to manage pain
& rather than **But**

**But** – Negates what came before
- Stops a thought; often heard as rejection.
- I hear you believe your mom is responding but the doctors indicate this is not purposeful

**And** – Builds & joins; connects words, feelings & thoughts.
- Create atmosphere of shared consideration, possibility & acceptance
- I hear you believe your mom is responding & we **wish** her responses were purposeful
Care imitates language; that is we tend to relate to people the same way we write & talk about them.

(Sasser, 1999)
A Sampling ~ Those We Serve

- Dysfunctional
- Entitled/VIP
- Demanding
- Failed
- Difficult

- Unrealistic
- Borderline
- Junkies/clean & dirty
- Non-compliant/adherent
- Overwhelmed
Unintended Consequences

Non compliant or non adherent
- Treatments not “offered”; not a “candidate"
- May limits options for post hospital plan

Bereavement & legacy of illness
- “Family decided to go with minimal care & comfort medications only”
- The neurologist- “99% sure there’s nothing we can do.”
- Wondering about the 01% keeps the mother up at night

(Goldstein, 2015)
This Is Where Heart & Brain Meet Courage
Silence Gives Consent
Help me understand what you are seeing, hearing...

Data, Data, Data, Data, Data...
Mitigating Unintended Harms

- Shared inquiry: consider information as data to be explored; respect perception
- Use preferred phrases & words
- Identify patient &/or family responses & frame as invitations for further clarification
- Direct exploration, discussion with colleagues always assuming best of intentions
Talking with Colleagues

- Give others the benefit of the doubt
- Start where they are
- Suggest alternatives
- Engender empathy – Parallel process
- Help develop self-awareness skills (aka counter-transference; their & ours)
- It takes time; be patient...
“Person” or “Therapy” First

Person-first language (PFL)
- Avoids marginalization or dehumanizing by defining or categorizing a person by a condition or a trait such as disease, age, disability rather than as a person who has that condition or trait.

Therapy-first language
- Avoids blaming patient & focuses on treatment or intervention which has not had intended or hoped for outcome.

(Kelemen & Groninger, 2017)
Opportunities to Impact Language

- Side bar conversations
- Family meetings
- On rounds
- Pre-Briefings & Debriefings
- Documentation
Documentation

- Demands of setting
- May be read by interdisciplinary colleagues
- Represents skills, intervention & outcomes
- Differentiates person from behaviors, illness, status
- Organizes observations, critical thinking
- Vehicle to influence care plan & perception of pt. & family
Documentation

Challenges

- Permanent record
- Pt-centered, family focused care
  - Yet the medical record is that of pt.
- Confidentiality of intimate information
  - What do others need to know to do their work?
- Write as if pt. & family were to read
A word is not a crystal, transparent & unchanging, it is the skin of a living thought & may vary greatly in color & content according to the circumstances & the time in which it is used.

~Oliver Wendell Holmes
References


Herman, Amy (2016). Visual Intelligence

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References


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