

Let's Stop the Hurt

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Traveling around the country doing presentations, I meet many people with disabilities and parents of children with disabilities. And a lot of them are hurting—really hurting. They're not hurting because they (or their children) have disabilities; they're hurting because of the way they're spoken to and treated by people who are supposed to be helping (service providers, educators, therapists, doctors, and others), as well as by other family members and/or friends. In turn, some inadvertently begin *hurting themselves* and adopt the role of "victim." We have the *power* to stop this cycle of emotional pain. Do we have the *will*?

When people with disabilities are hurt by the words or actions of professionals, it's usually because they accept the words/actions as "truth"—to one degree or another—and end up feeling hopeless. Seldom is the professional's expertise doubted or questioned. Worse, some feel powerless to make any decisions for themselves. "Tom" described his frustration at waiting and waiting for his voc-rehab counselor to find him a job. When asked why he didn't simply try to get a job on his own, he replied, "You mean I could *do* that?" Tom, like many others, had been thoroughly brainwashed into believing he was incompetent, and therefore dependent on the system, and he had no awareness that he could (and should) be in charge of his own life.

When parents are hurt by professionals, many feel sad or hopeless about their children's futures, and they may respond by working even harder to "cure" or "fix" their children through therapies and interventions. These actions may, in turn, unintentionally hurt the child deeply by repeatedly sending You're-Not-Okay messages. Other parents may turn their hurt into anger. Some direct their anger at professionals, with chaotic results. Some may hold the anger in, where it festers and grows, causing more pain. Tragically, in some cases, the anger may be misdirected toward the child.

A "one-time" hurt can be an insignificant occurrence that's easily forgotten. But the close relationships between professionals and people with disabilities/family members make the hurtful words of "helpers" that much more painful. And these repeated hurts—over a lifetime—from a variety of "helpers" can cause long-term harm, including feelings of hopelessness.

Similar outcomes occur with family members or friends. Again, what's one to do when those closest to you say things or behave in ways that—under the guise of "help" or "support"—make them seem more like "the enemy"?

The barbs that deeply wound are usually not intentional. When professionals, family members, or others make recommendations, offer advice, deliver a prognosis, review assessments, etc., they're doing what they believe is "best" for the person. Still...

The solution to this dilemma rests with "both sides"—those who *deliver* hurtful comments *and*

those who *receive* them. (It takes two to tango!) And it begins with recognizing that any words spoken are *opinions, not facts*. Even test results do not represent a permanent fact or the truth with a capital T—they only reflect the outcome of a certain test given on a certain day, by a certain person, in a certain place, etc.

Speakers can cause less hurt by saying:

IN MY OPINION...

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT...

RESULTS OF THE ASSESSMENTS SHOW THAT...

THE SERVICES WE OFFER INCLUDE ...

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT...

These indicate that the information *is* an opinion and/or that the listener has a *choice* to accept or reject the opinion, recommendation, service, etc.

In addition, speakers can spend some time thinking about their words *before opening their*

**The word is a force . . . like a sword with two edges,
your word can create the most beautiful dream,
or your word can destroy everything around you.**

Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements*

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mouths. Once the words are uttered, they might as well be written in stone. Explanations can be added or apologies offered, but the genie is out of the bottle!

While the words of professionals, friends, and family members are often meant to “help,” did the person with a disability or parents *ask for help*? Yes, when a person with a disability is receiving services, she’s in the “recipient” position. But professionals may extend their reach to areas outside of their expertise and/or which are none of their business. And family members or friends may offer unsolicited advice even when they know little or nothing of the subject!

When my son was very young, several professionals shared dismal predictions about his future. I recognized their comments as *opinions*, not facts, and so didn’t take their words to heart. Still, I chose to move on to other professionals: I didn’t want my son around people who didn’t believe in him. They might have helped my son’s *body*, but their attitudes and words could have harmed his *spirit*. It was a risk I wasn’t willing to take.

Think of it as a choice. Instead of automatically being hurt by someone’s words, ask yourself: do I agree or disagree with this opinion? If you disagree, *don’t take the words into your heart*. Instead, visualize the words as voice bubbles (like in comic strips) above the speaker’s head. Look at the words, and take as much time as you want before responding. You can even hold up a finger and say, “I’m thinking...” Keep the words at arm’s length while you think, and they won’t enter your heart and cause harm. If you disagree, you can calmly respond: “I respect your right to have this opinion, but I feel differently,” or “That’s an interesting opinion—I’ll think about it,” and then move on to something else and/or change the subject!

You can also ask for clarification, as in: “Do you mean...,” while you restate the other’s position in your own words. We often react or respond incorrectly

because we’ve *misunderstood* the speaker’s words or intent.

Sharing your feelings may also be helpful, as in, “I know you mean well, but your opinion/information/comment is hurtful.” And it’s important to remember that some people—regardless of the situation—dispense unsolicited advice to anyone and everyone! You may be one of *many* recipients of their “wisdom.” So we shouldn’t take everything personally!

Tongue-in-cheek responses can also work. A young woman at a house party enthusiastically told Suzanne about her recent internship at a Florida camp where children with certain disabilities were (supposedly) “cured” by swimming with dolphins. When she urged Suzanne to take her daughter there, Suzanne just as enthusiastically told a fib (with a big smile on her face), “Wow! What a coincidence—that’s on our list of things to do!” At that, the discussion ended—there was nothing more to say on either side!

Because Suzanne was “in agreement,” she did not have to defend her position, and the young woman did not feel compelled to convince Suzanne of the value of her advice.

Last, but certainly not least, parents must pay close attention to their own words and actions that may hurt

their children. Parents are often very good at protecting their sons and daughters from others, while unintentionally inflicting great pain with their own words and actions.

Some try to excuse *unintentional* pain, and may even say, “I didn’t *mean* to hurt you.” But a wise counselor once shared this wisdom with me: “If I *accidentally* step on your toe, does it hurt any less because it was accidental and not intentional?”

If we carefully choose when to speak and when to keep silent, and if we choose our words more carefully when we *do* speak, not only will we stop the hurt, we’ll also create a fertile environment where the seeds of hopes and dreams can blossom and grow.

**Unless what you are
about to say or do
has a high probability
for making things better,
don’t say it and don’t do it.**

Utah State University Parent News