

The Impact of Language

Are Our Words Important?

by Rev. Linn Possell

The language we use helps direct what we focus on as well as what we expect to experience. Language helps us connect with one another, tells us what is important to one another, and guides us in our response to one another. Language is important in relaying our message and focusing our attention, therefore we must pause and consider the words we choose. Traditionally, the language used to describe brain change and people living with dementia has drawn our attention to all that is lost with this process. For example, if a person loses their ability to communicate with language they may express themselves in other ways that may be viewed as a *behavior* which can be perceived as childlike and misbehaving. What if we were to look at this *behavior* as a way of communicating an unmet need?

The word ability is very different from the word loss and the choice we make with this impacts our relationship with others. For example, if you were to describe a friend, what are some of the words you would use? Would you describe them as friendly, funny, warm, compassionate, hardworking, skilled, curious, or generous? These words help us connect and focus on positive qualities. People living with dementia are friendly and curious, but this friendliness is often labeled as intrusive and bothersome. Someone who is skilled and is a hard worker is usually rewarded. However, when that same person is now living with dementia their abilities may have changed, but the need to be purposeful and engaged remains which can be perceived as being irritating.

While none of us want to be thought of in negative terms, why it is so easy to use negative language for a person with brain change? Dementia is often feared. Could it be that the traditional language has made us focus on the negative until it has become commonplace to think of and describe someone living with dementia by what they can no longer do? This focus on loss can be stressful for both the care partner and the person living with brain change. This stress can impact our quality of life. Language can either add to, or help, with the stress of dementia.

I am sure that we all have stories of language that have been used to describe people living with dementia that was hurtful rather than helpful.

What can we do differently? How can we change the traditional language that we use or have heard? How can we switch from focusing on the negative and loss to positive and retained abilities?

PAC is committed to helping individuals living with dementia continue to live a full life. PAC assists care partners and helps them focus on and utilize the person living with dementia's skills,

abilities, and opportunities for connection. Therefore, we ask and support everyone who is connected to someone living with dementia to carefully consider the language that we use regarding this brain change.

What language do you use regarding brain change?

What is your focus and how does this enhance the quality of life for you and the person living with brain change?

When have you heard negative language regarding brain change and how has this affected you or the person living with dementia?

What can we do/say differently to support quality of life and the possibilities that remain?