WORDS MATTER

Hey there, glad you joined me. I’m Stacy Nonnemacher and this is A Supporter’s Toolbox.

Words matter. Research has told us so. Our own life experiences have told us, as well. I think we all have that one situation where someone’s words have stuck with us – even if it was many years ago. I will never, ever forget the words and look on my favorite teacher’s face in fourth grade when a boy told her that I was being mean to him at recess. In that moment, I knew I had let her down and did not want to ever do that again – it changed my behavior. And, those words stuck with me. Those words had power. Those words have played over and over in my head for many decades – especially when I examine how I am interacting with others who I don’t necessarily want to be around like that boy on the playground.

Now consider the words we use in our field when we talk about someone. We often use words that we wouldn’t normally use to describe ourselves or use in our own lives. For instance, we say we take a break, but they go off task. We say we have interests or hobbies, but they perseverate. We say we stand up for ourselves, but they are non-compliant. These are very different words. And the words we use can make people feel better and can also make people feel worse. A 2019 study that use functional MRIs to examine how words impacted pain showed that pain-related words created more intense pain for the person and a stronger response in the brain. Another study in 2021 found that verbal encouragement, specifically using words like “go, go, go” and “go as far as you can,” improved performance on a balance test for people experiencing chronic ankle instability.

We know that words not only impact how we feel physically but also how we feel emotionally. Authors Dr. Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist at Thomas Jefferson University, and Mark Robert Waldman, a communications expert state, “a single word has the power to influence the expression of genes that regulate physical and emotional stress.” They say that exercising positive thoughts can change one’s reality. That holding a positive view of ourselves helps train our brain to see the good in others. So by exercising consistent positive thoughts and words, we can not only change our self-perception but also how we perceive the world around us thus shaping our reality and changing the world for the better.

So let us use our words to positively impact others – to impact the people we support and how they view themselves and how society views neurodiversity. Imagine influencing other people’s perceptions about people with disabilities and also influencing people’s perceptions about themselves and what they can offer to this world. Words can do that.

How you ask?

Let us learn to speak with mindfulness. We have all spoken from the cuff sometimes perhaps uncontrollably or emotionally without thinking how those words could and do impact others. Mindfulness is challenging us to carefully consider how we talk about and how we talk to people we support. To recognize words that could cut them down and those that can build them up. The goal is to do more of the latter – help them feel good about themselves and others. So think about what words would mean the most TO the person you support and then, the next time you are correcting them or supporting them, use those words. Those words that have the most impact that will influence how they show up and engage next time they are doing that thing. And that’s individualized – what words will
have the most impact? And when you are talking about the person you support or are with them in front of others, model those words that will positively impact how others see the person. You may not believe it, but you have an incredible power – it’s the power to change the way people see themselves and to also change the way others view them, as well.

Somewhere in my readings of the author Judy Endow, someone who also happens to have autism, I read “Your voice of majority becomes the yardstick of measure applied to all humanity. Your words have the power to add inches – even feet – to my stature” So let’s always remember to speak words that will build self-esteem, confidence, relationships, and possibilities.

Thanks again for joining me. I’ll leave you with the simple words of Dr. Atul Gawande “Do what is right, and do it now”