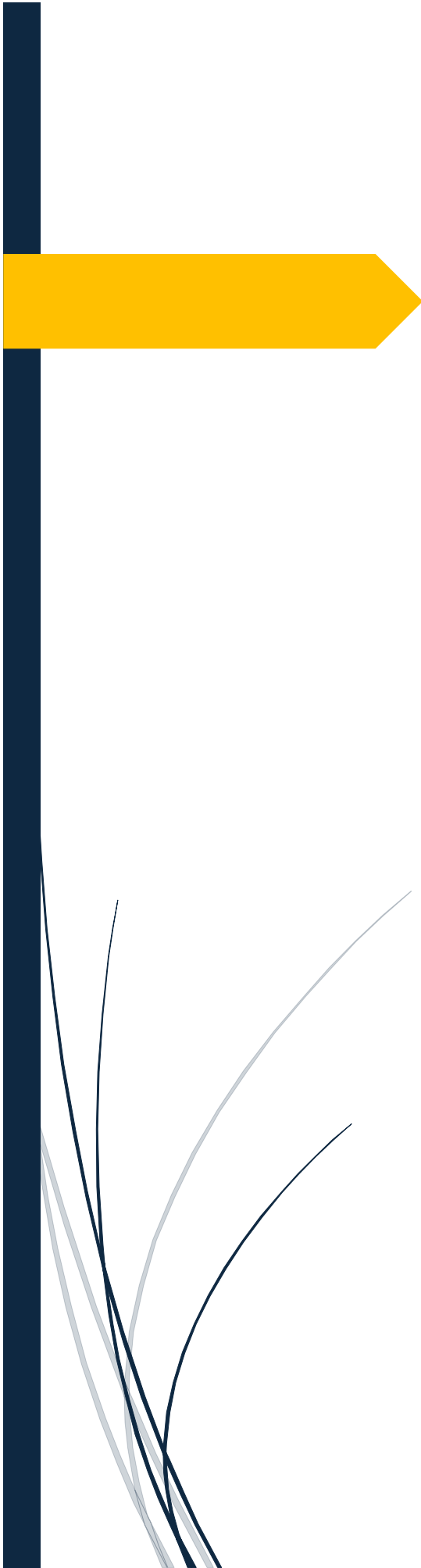




Words & Language

How the words we choose
influence the way we
understand ourselves, others,
and our experiences

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Words do more than communicate information. They help us **describe experiences, organize thoughts, assign meaning, express emotions, and understand ourselves and other people.**

Sometimes the language we use creates clarity and possibility. Other times, our words can unintentionally make an experience more rigid, absolute, personal, or difficult to navigate.

The goal isn't to find the **perfect words**. It's to become more aware of the language we use and curious about **what those words are doing**.

Words → Meaning → Story → Response

Why Words Matter

Language can influence:

- **Thoughts** – How we describe something can shape how we think about it.
- **Emotions** – Words can increase or decrease the intensity of an experience.
- **Identity** – Describing something we *did* can become a statement about who we *are*.
- **Relationships** – Language can invite understanding or create defensiveness and distance.
- **Possibility** – Absolute language can narrow our options; flexible language can help us see alternatives.
- **Action** – The story we tell about a situation can influence what we believe we can do next.

Sometimes changing the language doesn't change the situation but it can change **how we understand and respond to it**.

Notice Your Language

Rather than labeling words as simply “good” or “bad,” notice whether your language is helping you **understand, communicate, and respond effectively**.

Instead of automatically saying...

Experiment with...

“I can't...”

“This is difficult...” / “I don't know how yet...”

“You always...” / “You never...”

“I've noticed this happening...”

“I should...”

“I want to...” / “It's important to me...”

“That's just how I am.”

“This is a pattern I have...”

Instead of automatically saying...

“It's not fair.”

“I'm going to fail.”

“Whatever.”

“I hate...”

“I'm stupid.”

“You make me feel...”

Experiment with...

“This isn't what I expected or wanted.”

“I don't know how this will turn out.”

“I'm frustrated and need a minute.”

“I really struggle with...”

“I made a mistake.”

“When this happens, I notice I feel...”

The alternative isn't automatically “better.” Ask: **Is there another way to describe this that is more accurate, useful, or complete?**

Be Careful with Absolutes

Words such as: **Always • Never • Everyone • No one • Everything • Nothing • Completely • Impossible** can sometimes accurately communicate intensity. But they can also turn a **specific experience into a global conclusion**.

“You never listen to me” may actually mean: “I didn't feel heard during that conversation.”

And: “Nothing is working” may mean: “The things I've tried haven't worked yet.”

Moving from **absolute** → **specific** can make an experience easier to understand and address.

Behavior Is Not Identity

Pay attention when language turns an **experience, mistake, behavior, or difficulty into an identity**.

- **I failed → I am a failure.**
- **I acted selfishly → I am selfish.**
- **I feel anxious → I am an anxious person.**
- **I made a bad decision → I am stupid.**

Try separating **what happened** from **who you are**: “I made a decision I regret.”

“I didn't handle that conversation the way I wanted to.”

“I'm experiencing anxiety right now.”

You can take responsibility for behavior **without turning the behavior into your entire identity**.

Labels Can Become Stories

Labels can be useful shortcuts, but they can also reduce complex people and experiences to a single description. **Lazy • Needy • Difficult • Selfish • Dramatic • Controlling • Sensitive • Avoidant • Broken**

When you notice a label, become curious: **What behavior am I actually describing?**

Instead of: “He's lazy.”

Try: “I've noticed he hasn't followed through on several responsibilities we agreed on.”

Specific language gives us something we can **understand, discuss, and potentially change.**

Rewriting Inner Dialogue

Before: “I'm so stupid for forgetting that.”

After: “I forgot something important. What would help me remember next time?”

Before: “No one ever listens to me.”

After: “I don't feel heard right now. What do I want the other person to understand?”

Before: “I shouldn't feel this way.”

After: “I don't like feeling this way, but I'm curious about what this emotion is telling me.”

The goal isn't forced positivity. **Aim for language that is accurate, compassionate, and useful.**

Practice More Intentional Language

1. **Pause** – Notice the words you're about to use.
2. **Get Specific** – Move from generalizations toward what actually happened.
3. **Name the Experience** – Describe thoughts, feelings, needs, and behaviors rather than assigning character.
4. **Own Your Perspective** – Use *I notice, I think, I feel, I need, and I wonder*.
5. **Stay Curious** – Ask whether there might be another interpretation.
6. **Leave Room for Change** – Avoid language that unnecessarily turns today's difficulty into tomorrow's identity.

Practice

- What words or phrases do I repeatedly use about **myself**?
- What labels do I commonly assign to **other people**?
- Where do I use **absolute language**?
- Which words tend to increase shame, defensiveness, or hopelessness?
- What am I actually trying to communicate underneath those words?
- Is there a more **specific, accurate, or useful** way to describe the experience?

Remember

Words don't simply describe our experiences. They can influence the **meaning we give those experiences**.

Notice your language. Get curious about the story it creates. Ask whether that story leaves enough room for **context, complexity, responsibility, and change**.

Change the Words → Explore the Meaning → Expand the Story → Create More Possibilities