

# Words Can Hurt, Longer Than You Might Think

The tongue and lips are vital to sensual pleasure, but not only in the way you think.

The ancient Greek poet Euripides said, "The tongue is mightier than the blade." And we've all witnessed the cut. Although apologies can ease the pain, the sting remains after the stinger is removed.



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I can't tell you how many couples come to my office locked in bitter disputes they both nurse for years, yet they can't figure out why their sex life has taken a tailspin. They underestimate how their style of relating affects the quality of their sexual desire, arousal and enjoyment. Many of them think of sex as a hormone-driven force that should keep chugging along, immune from acrimony or neglect.

I can usually tell quite a bit about a couple's intimacy problem just by listening to the way they talk to one another.

Do they speak to their partner directly, or do they talk through me about the other? Do they periodically give each other some respectful eye contact? Do they nod or affirm what their partners has to say, or do they communicate annoyance by rolling their eyes, turning their head or subtly distracting when their partner speaks?

Although everyone knows good communication is essential to good sex, its often just "lip service." It's not that we don't know how to communicate well. We do it all day with our business associates and friends. But when it comes to sharing within our most intimate relationships, we unfortunately assume we can let it all hang out and that the passion should remain unscathed.

Regardless of how much testosterone, estrogen or Viagra you decide to ingest, it won't neutralize unkindness. Words matter. When children are

bullied or teased, well-intentioned parents may tell them, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

Nonsense. Words do hurt, more than we'd like to admit. But why do we criticize those we love? Sometimes love and criticism gets jumbled. Kids hear things like, "The truth hurts. . . This hurts me more than it hurts you. . . I'm spanking you because I love you."

We know parents who unintentionally shame their children into going on a diet, being the star athlete or tell their kids that they'll never amount to anything if they don't do their homework or clean their room, all for their own "good."

Husbands make jokes about a wife's weight gain or sedentary lifestyle to motivate them to diet. Hostility is presented in the guise of caring. A wife tells her husband to stop being so lazy and comments, "No wonder you were passed over for that promotion at work." And then she wonders why he doesn't reach out to her sexually.

When it comes to sexual receptivity, words are more powerful than a new technique, position or device. Passion is a delicately balanced experience. It outsmarts us with its complexity and memory for detail. A carelessly uttered comment may endlessly reverberate and surface at the most inopportune moments.

Take John and Martha, for example. Married 33 years, they're finally on the vacation of their dreams. The Umbrian countryside is more

exquisite than they could have ever imagined, a rainbow of scents and colors. As they arrive at their private villa, they find the lace-trimmed sheets invitingly turned down. Fresh flowers adorn the bedside and fireplace. It's nightfall. A gentle breeze enters through the open shutters, refreshingly cool.

Beneath their balcony, the pink-roofed buildings are illuminated by the stars. Who could ask for a more romantic setting? John walks over to Martha as she stands at the window admiring the view. He begins to caress the small of her back and moves to her thighs.

Almost reflexively, she pulls away. She immediately apologizes, but finds herself remembering a comment John made during their last argument. He told her that she'd "let herself go physically, and he never liked fat women."

Perhaps she had let herself go, she thinks, but the comment was cruel nonetheless. Although John apologized, his words have stayed with her.

"What's wrong?" John's voice breaks into her internal dialogue.

"Nothing," she replies, "I'm just a little tired from the

flight. . . Maybe we could just get a little rest tonight."

Disappointed and rejected, John retreats to his usual side of the bed. He tosses and turns, unable to sleep, reworking all of the past sexual rejections and recognizing that Tuscany is no different from Connecticut, not when it comes to their lack of intimacy. So much for the so-called vacation of their dreams.

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Countless couples search for a surefire method to restore their sexual arousal or rekindle their passion but are out of touch with how they collude in the day-to-day destruction of the intimacy they seek. They are so accustomed to being critical or neglectful of one another that they hardly notice their interaction on their radar screen. It's become the background noise of their lives, the stage set of their practiced production.

Not all criticism is damaging to intimacy. The tongue can connect as easily as it can distance. The Buddha considered "right speech" as important as "right action." It can strengthen partnerships if couples are willing to honestly reflect on their comments, take responsibility for statements that are out of line, change their behaviors and work to repair the hurt.

You don't have to wait until you're in Tuscany, Vieques, or Timbuktu. Émile Coué, a French psychotherapist in the early 1920s, suggested a method of healing and self improvement called "conscious autosuggestion."

In the same spirit, affirming each other is one of the most powerful sexual aphrodisiacs: "I'm so happy you're in my life. . . You make me smile. . . I love laughing with you. . . I remember why I chose you to be in my life . . ."

Try those for starters.

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