

Sticks and Stones...

At one time or another, all of us have either been the target or the perpetrator of a putdown. We tend not to think anything about putdowns because we all know that, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Most of us had this belief drilled into our heads by parents and teachers by the time we were seven years old and haven’t really taken time to see if it is true or not. Further, many people disguise their putdowns as jokes. A man might say to his friends while his wife is sitting next to him, “After a few beers, even Sue [my wife] starts looking good.” Or a brother might say to his sister, “Hey Porkie, you don’t need any more of those chips...” These sorts of statements usually elicit laughter from those near by. However, the criticism behind the veil of a joke is often clear to the recipient, even if they don’t acknowledge it. On those rare occasions when a perpetrator does get challenged for issuing a putdown, they often respond with another putdown, perhaps by saying something like, “Don’t get your panties in a wad, Susan. It was just a joke.” The message is, “Don’t be so sensitive. I’m not doing anything wrong. You’re supposed to just take whatever I dish out.” Other times, the perpetrator may completely ignore the challenge, perhaps by rolling his or her eyes and/or saying, “Whatever,” making it clear that the issue is not important.

Other times, people put others down more blatantly. For example, a woman may tell her girlfriend, “Are you stupid or what? Even a monkey could program the VCR.” A man may tell his fiancée, “Geez, you look like a whale. I’m not going to marry you until you lose at least 30 lbs.” Or a woman may tell her husband, “You don’t you do anything right. I can’t believe I married such a failure.” Naked, these putdowns pack a powerful sting, especially when they target the recipient’s deep-seated insecurities. Challenges to these overt putdowns often receive a hostile response. Perpetrators often justify their hurtful comments on factual grounds and dismiss the harmful impact as meaningless and insignificant. For example, if challenged on his weight loss ultimatum, the man might retort, “Well, you’re too fat, honey. No one wants to marry a fat woman.” Again, the notion that hurtful words are not harmful comes in to play, and injured parties are simply supposed to suck it up.

Unfortunately, the statement, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” is a lie. Words can hurt, sometimes even more than sticks or stones. Think about the last big injury that you had that is now healed. Maybe you almost cut your thumb off trying to slice a bagel or broke your ankle when you were skiing. When you think about the wounds, even when you look at the scars or imagine the blood, you probably can’t feel those physical sensations. Now think about a time when someone said something hurtful to you. Perhaps after struggling for six weeks with math in elementary school, your father called you stupid for bringing home a B in math on your report card. Or maybe you spent hours getting ready for a date only to have your date tell you that your hair looked stupid or that you looked fat in the dress you had on. I bet that if you let yourself, you can recall almost every nuance of the pain from that incident: the shame, the humiliation, the rejection, the betrayal, and the feelings of worthlessness. The pain caused by words may not be as immediately life-threatening as that of a physical injury, but it lasts far longer.

Putdowns from significant others such as partners, boyfriends, girlfriends, spouses, and close family members tend to be more damaging than putdowns from co-workers and strangers because the relationship is more significant. Further, significant others are more knowledgeable about their victims' weak spots and vulnerabilities and often use this information against their victims.

Control is another aspect of putdowns that the childhood saying ignores. Like stealth weapons, putdowns and the defenses used to protect them are sneaky ways to gain and enforce or show control in relationships. The statement, "Hey, Porkie..." is intended to get the sister to stop eating. Comebacks like, "Don't get your panties in a wad..." are attempts to get others from challenging offensive jokes and comments. And insults like "You don't you do anything right. I can't believe I married such a failure." are ways to gain or maintain domination in a relationship.

We need to start recognizing the damage that words can cause and do something to stop them. We need to challenge or confront others when they use putdowns. An easy way to do this is to clarify the underlying meaning of the putdown and tell the perpetrator to stop using such words. For example, the girlfriend might respond to "Are you stupid or what? Even a monkey could program the VCR." with something like "You're trying to make me feel inept. That's really inappropriate. Don't say things like that to me." Moreover, we need to stop tolerating putdowns. If the perpetrator is unwilling to stop using putdowns, they obviously don't care enough about us to treat us with respect. We don't need those kinds of people in our lives. It's time to distance ourselves from that person or cut them out of our lives entirely.

At another level, we need to watch our own words and stop using putdowns. If we are angry with someone else, we need to be upfront and tell that person that we are angry and why. If we have issues with their behavior and it affects us, we need to talk to them about that. If, on the other hand, we have issues with what someone else eats, wears or looks like, we need to look at our own issues and let go of them. If our partner or spouse is obese and we are afraid that they are killing themselves with their diet, we need to share our fear with them and support them in their efforts to become healthier. In contrast, if we simply don't like the fact that our spouse or partner weighs a few pounds more than we think they should, we need to explore our own issues about that.

Finally, words do hurt and we need to quit lying to our children by telling them that they don't. Instead of invalidating a child's feelings when they come crying to us, telling us that someone said something hurtful, we need to empathize with them that it does hurt to be called names, comfort them, and reassure them that those hurtful words or names are not true.

Originally appeared on Suite101.com