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More Words to Use and Words to Lose

Dear Communications Doctor,
Your recent words to use and words to lose column intrigued me and several of my co-workers. What we're most curious to know is if you have other examples of words or phrases that should be avoided so that better communication can occur.
J.G. – Oklahoma City

Dear J.G.-
As you'll remember from the earlier column, the idea behind words to use and words to lose is that our words can be used to build relationships up or they can be used to tear relationships down. With this in mind, let's get started by addressing what at first seem like two innocent words – *always* and *never*.

Always and *never* merit close examination because each is typically used to over-exaggerate a situation. Let me explain.

Take a stereotypical conversation between husband and wife where the wife says to her husband, "You *never* spend time with me." Although upon first glance, it may seem to the wife that this is the case, that by looking closer at the situation she would probably find plenty of instances where her husband does spend time with her, just not the quantity or quality of time that she desires. In this instance, through using the word *never*, she grossly inflates the situation, which decreases the likelihood that her husband will respond in a calm, non-combative and cooperative manner. After all, would you want to spend time with a person who seems to have forgotten all of the time that you *have* spent together?

I should think not. Rather, as is typical when one gets an accusation thrown in his face, the husband is more likely to respond to her super-charged comment by saying, "You are always on my back about something." Similarly exaggerated, his response also adds fuel to the fire. One can easily see that the end result of their conversation is not going to be pretty, nor conducive to them building a positive relationship with each other.

So what are better options than the words *always* and *never*? Here are several prescriptions that may be just what the doctor ordered.

Prescription #1: Be specific. Rather than using the words *always* and *never*, more effective communication would result if more precise descriptions or details were given. For instance, instead of using the phrase, "You never spend time with me!" the wife could be more specific with her communication by quantifying the time that she has spent alone. For example, she could say, "For the past four days, I've noticed that we haven't spent over thirty minutes with each other," or "For the past several hours I've noticed that you've been paying more attention to the television than you have to me."

Prescription #2: Express your needs. To further clarify her communication and to increase the likelihood that her husband will deliver the behavior that she is looking for, it would improve the communication if she would include a statement that conveys her needs. Statements such as "I really would enjoy spending at least an hour every evening with you," or "It's important for me to spend time with you and I've noticed we haven't been doing a lot of that in the past few days."

Prescription #3: Keep the message "I" focused, rather than "you" focused. Instead of the husband saying, "You are always on my back about something," a more positive response might be, "I'm having a hard time understanding what you mean when you say we don't spend any time together." Or, one could try: "I understand that it's important to you to spend more time with me." By keeping the focus on ourselves and on our needs, rather than pointing a finger at the other person by using the word "you," many misunderstandings can be avoided.

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit www.CommunicationsDoctor.com.