

Say It Ethically: Language And Terminology (Part Three)

The words you choose, and how you use them, can say a lot more to a client than you may think.



When I began developing this series on verbal communication and ethics, my intention, which came to fruition, was to present it in two parts. Part One, appearing in the Fall 2003 issue, focused on the sensitive issue of reporting and sharing information about the sexual misconduct of clients or practitioners. Part Two, in the Winter 2004 issue, addressed ethical table talk, or the verbal communication that occurs between a practitioner and a client while the client is actually lying on the treatment table.

As I considered the matter of ethical speech in writing parts one and two, I realized that another issue deserved attention and that the series needed a third part. This writing presents, for consideration and reflection, how language and terminology can be an ethical matter.

Language, Terminology And Ethics

Language and terminology are about how we say what we say. They take into account the words, expressions, vocabulary, phraseology, sayings and terms we use in our professional interactions. They become an ethical issue because they reflect our professionalism, our respect for our profession, our clients and other professionals, our adherence to the scope of our practice, and our knowledge and

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education. While all of these ways in which language and terminology uphold ethics tend to interweave and dovetail, I will expound on each point individually.

Language And Professionalism

How we say what we say reflects our degree of professionalism. Our grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and ability to articulate are all important aspects of a professional presentation. The *Ethics of Touch* reads, “The term professionalism is related to ethical behavior.... Professionalism is the quality of the image an individual conveys. [It] stems from your attitudes and is manifested through your...communication skills.”¹

Informed consent is another vital aspect of professional ethics. This means that we need to fully explain the session and attain client agreement on the course of our plan and the intended outcome before the treatment begins. Adding to this, the distinguished intimate nature of massage and the inherent vulnerability of the client require that every effort be made to present an image of competency and confidence. Use of slang, puns and ungrammatical sayings can cast an inaccurate image of your ability and skills.

For example, consider the use of the word “ain’t” when you are speaking with a client. Webster defines “ain’t” as being “used in dialog representing uneducated or homely speech.”² So even though you may have every intention of portraying yourself as skilled, trained and professional, you may be undermining your professional image by your choice of words.

Watching our “shoulds” helps us stay mindful of the fact that we need to be clear with ourselves and our clients about our intentions. Furthermore, it allows us to stay respectful of the rights of others.

There are ways to enhance your ability to express yourself more effectively and professionally through the spoken word. If you identify this as an area that merits support in your own professional life, you can take courses on effective communication, public speaking or English grammar at a local community college or high school adult education program.

Language And Respect

Ethical behavior includes demonstrating respect toward others by our verbal communication. The more obvious ways we maintain verbal respect are how we speak to others, how we address them and how well we uphold their confidentiality and right to privacy. Not so obvious, though, are our choice of words and phrases, our intonation, our inflection, our intention behind what we say and how we speak of others.

For instance, it may be tempting to use coercive statements to try to get a client to schedule another appointment. It would be more respectful to say, “I think you would benefit greatly by regular massage,” instead of, “You really need massage on a regular basis.” Or, “This type of shoulder problem usually requires a series of weekly treatments,” instead of, “This didn’t happen overnight and it won’t go away overnight. You have to come for a few months if you want this to improve.”

Be mindful of words that can manipulate, such as “should.” Start noticing how often you use “should,” especially with your clients. What does “should” actually mean; what is the intention behind the word when you use it? Do you mean

“must,” or are you simply giving recommendations and suggestions based on your professional opinion? (Note that I specify professional opinion, since giving a personal opinion is a slippery ethical slope.)

The word “should” may provoke feelings of guilt and defensiveness in others—two feelings that are incompatible with fostering a climate of client respect. It is more professional to clearly state what you really mean. If it’s a “must,” say that. For example, “It’s imperative that you ice this when you get home” would be acceptable.

Or, if it’s a matter of giving your professional opinion, state that. Say, for example, “I strongly recommend that you talk to a counselor or therapist to get support for the emotional issues that have come up today during the massage. I will be happy to give you the name of someone I often refer clients to.”

Watching our “shoulds” helps us stay mindful of the fact that we need to be clear with ourselves and our clients about our intentions. Furthermore, it allows us to stay respectful of the rights of others. If you feel a “should” brewing, put it to the ethical litmus test: Ask yourself what is wanted and what is needed in this situation? The answers to those two questions can help you find a more effective, ego-friendly way of expressing yourself.

How we speak of others also reflects our beliefs, opinions and prejudices, and reflects our degree of respect toward others and human diversity. The language we use when we express our beliefs and feelings about others, either a particular profession, professional or situation involving others, can be injurious to their reputation and can influence a client greatly. Unless asked, it may be more respectful to refrain from expressing ourselves. If asked, it is imperative to express ourselves with language that embodies unanimous respect.

Language, Terminology And Scope Of Practice

Proper phraseology can make the difference between staying within our scope of practice, walking the fine line of ambiguity and blatantly stepping beyond legal



and ethical parameters. Consider the following clear examples.

In New Hampshire, a person who massages animals, even if the person is a licensed massage therapist, cannot use the words “therapy” or “therapist,” because massage therapy can only be practiced on animals by a veterinarian. Non-veterinarians can do massage, but not massage therapy, because therapy implies practicing medicine.

During the late 1990s, discrepancy existed in Connecticut about use of the word “treatment” by massage therapists, since “treating” a condition insinuated the practice of medicine. That has since been resolved, and it is no longer an issue, but it justifies the point that the use of certain words and terms can be ethically risky.

Beyond the issue of legalities, our language and terminology also reveal the degree of our faithfulness to our scope of practice. While we know that diagnosing is practicing medicine and is against all scope of practice rules for massage therapists, we do need to express our opinions and discuss our findings in ways that respect our knowledge and expertise.

The simplest way to uphold scope of practice boundaries and still express ourselves with professional esteem is to state the objective and anatomical facts about what we find. Here’s an example: A client comes for massage three days after a motor vehicle accident, and has all the signs and symptoms of whiplash. No one else has evaluated her for her complaints of neck and headache pain. The ethically safest way to discuss it with the client, and with the medical professionals we refer the client to, is to state

our objective findings without giving our opinion or naming a condition. Instead of saying, “I can’t diagnose because I’m not a doctor, but I think you have whiplash, so you need to see a doctor,” the ethically safe way to state it is, “The anterior, lateral and posterior neck muscles (name the muscles if you can) are tight, seem to be splinting and harbor many trigger points; you have poor active, passive and resisted range of motion in all directions. You need to see a doctor for diagnosis.”

Language, Knowledge And Education

As an anatomy teacher, I have a pet peeve about professional massage therapists who mispronounce anatomical terms and medical terminology. Granted, it can be as difficult and challenging as learning another language. But at the same time, a professional massage therapist takes this challenge seriously if she wants to support professionalism and uphold educational standards.

To call it the “biceps” or “triceps” is to jeopardize the recognition and appreciation of the depth of our anatomy education. (Correctly spelled, there is no “t” in either word.) To say, “palpitation” for “palpation,” another verbal snag, can put alarm into the ear of the listener. Use of the word “lingual” or “linguinal” (which isn’t a word) when we mean “inguinal” can cause an awkward misleading. These slight mistakes, which are so easy to make, can totally undermine your image of competency.

If you struggle with the Latin and Greek terms, as many do, find an anatomy buff who is willing to help you learn correct

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pronunciations. Anatomy textbooks, medical dictionaries and books on medical terminology provide tips to help you know the correct enunciation of terms as well.

Conclusion

How we say what we say reflects our ethical-mindedness. The many ways we need to verbally communicate with clients gives us many opportunities to enhance our professional effectiveness.

Professional, accurate, respectful and well-articulated language and terminology are foundational elements in building trust and creating an ethically safe environment. These skills are like seasoned hands—they both invite the client to relax into the safety and security of our competency. 📖



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