



Toolbox Talk - Words Matter

How to Avoid Words That Harm and Begin Using Words That Heal

Pain is a deeply personal experience, shaped by factors like stress, anxiety, expectations, sleep, past trauma, and societal norms. The way we talk about pain, and the beliefs we hold about it, can significantly influence the healing process, either helping or hindering recovery.

Pain 101

Pain does not always equal damage. It's your body's alarm system, similar to a smoke detector. Its purpose is to alert you to potential harm and prompt protective action. However, this alarm can sound without significant tissue damage, think old injuries flaring up during periods of stress or poor sleep, or persist longer than expected, as in chronic pain.

Your brain plays a vital role in evaluating threats and deciding when to trigger a pain response. Stress, fear, and negative language can amplify these signals and make the brain more sensitive. That's why the words we use matter.

WORDS THAT HARM

Certain types of language can "turn up the volume" on pain and make it feel more intense:

- **Catastrophizing (Exaggeration):**
 - Phrases like "My knee is totally jacked up" or "I've never seen a back this bad" can convince your brain that the injury is more severe than it is, which increases pain signaling.
- **Hopelessness:**
 - Saying things like "My back will never be the same" or "You'll never be without pain" fuels stress and robs the body of hope, keeping the alarm system activated and preventing healing.
- **Dismissiveness:**
 - Remarks like "Toughen up" or "That's part of the job" discourage injury reporting, worsen mental health, and allow minor issues to escalate because help isn't sought early.
- **Scary Medical Jargon:**
 - Terms like "herniated disc," "degeneration," or "torn rotator cuff" can sound permanent or terrifying, but in reality, most minor to moderate injuries heal well with time and proper care from medical professionals.



WORDS THAT HEAL

Just as negative words can amplify pain, encouraging and empowering language can reduce stress and promote healing

- **Use hopeful reframing:**
 - Instead of saying “My back is killing me” or “I jacked up my knee yesterday,” try:
 - “My knee feels a little grumpy this morning, I’ll be careful with it today,” or
 - “My back is in protection mode, I’ll watch my form and do a few stretches to loosen it up.”
 - This shift emphasizes self-care and focuses attention on what you CAN do instead of what you CAN’T. It doesn’t ignore pain, it transforms your relationship with it.
- **Encourage support and early action:**
 - Avoid comments like “Walk it off” or “It’s not that bad.” Instead, encourage injury reporting and seek help promptly. Sometimes, a little information and reassurance are enough to calm the brain’s alarm system and begin reducing pain.

LEAN ON YOUR TEAM

On-site PTs and medics are excellent resources. They can provide education, insight, and a realistic outlook that fosters recovery and helps lower anxiety.

Injury and recovery are not just physical experiences; they’re deeply influenced by mindset and language. When we choose our words with care, we open the door to healing, resilience, and self-efficacy. By fostering a culture of encouragement, clear communication, and early support, we empower individuals to take control of their recovery and help others feel heard, understood, and guided. Words matter, and when used wisely, they become one of the most powerful tools we have in the path to wellness.