

How to Improve Your Relationships with Wise Speech

Celebrities always seem to be in the news. For example there was the incident with Mel Gibson's abusive outbursts against his girlfriend. As a psychotherapist working with couples and families I know that there are always two sides in any relationship although no one has the right to verbally or physically attack another individual. Even though directing angry and hurtful words at another is not necessarily life threatening the emotional wounds they create can be just as deep as physical abuse.

From both a Buddhist (non violent) and a healthy psychological view, if you have an unwholesome intention and are consciously choosing to manipulate or hurt others, you're limiting your own capacity for change and stunting the creative unfolding of your own life. Your energy is being wasted on the futile effort of trying to force the external world to conform to your vision. The mental and emotional effort required to maintain these actions is enormous. Having wise intention is more than merely ethical; it's necessary for psychological well-being and clear thinking.

The greater our facility with language, the more tempting it can be to try to control situations through our words. Insults and sarcasm can dominate and intimidate others, and someone who's very verbally gifted may use these techniques to manipulate others in a subtle or not-so-subtle way. Gossip unfairly gives us power over others. Left-handed compliments designed to make someone doubt himself and feel weak, or carefully constructed insults designed to humiliate another person while preventing him from recognizing that he's being ridiculed publicly, are common weapons in the arsenal of one who doesn't exercise wise speech.

Wise speech requires mindful attention to the power of your words and the messages underneath them. Recognize that your tone of voice, facial expression, and body language matter, and drop any defensiveness that arises in you when someone points out the discrepancy between the literal meaning of your words and the message you're sending with your eyes, crossed arms, or disrespectful tone.

Direct, honest communication even if it's uncomfortable is vital if you want to have more productive and respectful conversations. Often, I've counseled executives who had no idea just how intimidating or disrespectful they were when speaking to employees. When in a panic, they tended to respond with aggressive speech meant to frighten others into changing their behavior in order to placate upper management. This approach shuts down productive communication, reducing the manager's ability to see the larger picture, make better decisions, and effectively influence his or her team. Good leaders carefully hone what they say, mindfully expressing themselves.

When we cultivate wise speech, we don't fear saying something wrong. However, we're more attuned to the quality of our words and their effect on others. We speak up and say, "You seem upset by what I just said. Have I hurt your feelings?" inviting the other person to let go of his suffering. Wise speech fosters good relationships and partnerships and prevents future crises.

Sometimes, we should speak up in order to influence someone to change, but wise speech requires that we do so kindly and respectfully. Although it may seem well meaning, being blunt or tactless with another is unkind and usually motivated not by a genuine desire to help that person but by the need to feel superior and be intimidating. Wise speech is gentle, never cruel or harsh. It enhances the situation by inviting everyone to improve it instead of shutting down the communication process.

To speak the truth respectfully, you must let go of your desire to pressure others into doing what you want. At some point, you may discern that no matter how often you say the same thing with kindness, honesty, and compassion, you'll never affect the other person the way you'd like. Part of wise speech is letting go of your attachment to having your words change the way others think, feel, or behave.

But not only do we need to be conscious of the words we say to others but also the ones we direct at ourselves. Despite their popularity in our culture, cynicism and pessimism have been shown to be poor tools for creating a sense of well-being, although they may provide an illusory sense of power for a short time. The cynic who claims, "I know the system isn't set up to allow people like me to achieve my goals," isn't empowered but trapped in an unwholesome state of mind where his only choices are anger, sadness, and other unwholesome emotions. There can be no true joy or contentment in believing that what lies ahead will, in all certainty, generate more suffering.

Often people who are verbally abusive have the personality diseases of insecurity, inferiority, helplessness and hopelessness. When I'm coaching or counseling my clients I teach them is how to become mindfully aware of their unwholesome emotions so instead of being completely immersed in an experience that they're unwittingly manipulating, they'll experience a sense, however fleeting, that they're doing something unwholesome. An uncomfortable thought such as, "I'm trying to make him feel guilty so that he does what I want him to," or "I ought to let her know that I disagree, but it's easier for me to say yes and work behind her back to do what I really want" may arise. Instead of quickly dismissing it, they allow themselves to experience any guilt or shame that arises. Then they consciously and bravely explore why they feel the need to resort to manipulation and control. This discovery process gives them the strength to accept the situation exactly as it is, even if they don't like it, and use positive means to influence it for the better.

Wise speech has nothing to do with how cleverly we can use words to hurt or intimidate others and establish our power. It requires speaking with honesty and respect for the listener and ourselves, and trusting that a wholesome interaction will lead to a positive outcome.