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RAP

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Hurtful and Dismissive Remarks: How to Change the Tone

Not my problem.
Aren't you clever.
Here we go again.
Yeah, I heard that yesterday.
Get over it.

You hear dismissive phrases every day. You see them on t-shirts, bumper stickers and social media. You may be at the giving or receiving end of a remark that hurts, intentionally or unintentionally.

When does an occasional sarcastic remark or playful putdown become a real problem? How can you tell when you are coming across as dismissive? And what can you do if remarks directed at you get in the way of effective work relationships?



"A kind gesture can reach a wound that only compassion can heal."

- Steve Maraboli, *Life, the Truth, and Being Free*

Team Efforts Can Suffer

Organizational expert and consultant Rick Brenner, Chaco Canyon Consulting, helps dynamic organizations improve their effectiveness, especially in environments where success depends on high performance.

"Dismissive speech impairs communication and it doesn't," says Brenner. "If your intention is to communicate disdain, contempt and disregard, it is an effective tool of communication. It works. If you want a harmonious workplace, though, dismissive comments are very destructive."

When hurtful and dismissive speech is tolerated in any work environment, teamwork can suffer, Brenner says. "In a health care setting, if someone important on the team repeatedly degrades the efforts of others to the point that it upsets them emotionally, the team will not be able to do its job well. That can be injurious to the organization and to patients."

Recognize Words and Tone

Brenner recommends becoming familiar with the words and phrases offenders typically use. (See *Dismissive*

Good communication skills can smooth your way in every personal and work situation. When you are in a high-pressure work environment, there's not always time to choose the right words or tone. Many barriers can stand in the way of effective communication—time, culture, language, old habits, inattentive listening or unfamiliarity with a new environment.

If you find yourself questioning whether you need extra help to become a better communicator during your residency, you have a caring and confidential resource available 24/7: your Resident Assistance Program. Equipped to help you resolve troubling, stressful and overwhelming personal and work related issues, RAP professionals will listen to your concerns.

Contact RAP: 813-870-3344

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"Because many of the words and phrases do have legitimate uses, the context and delivery style determine whether they're being used offensively," he says. "Since some messages can be read both ways, the sender can often get away with it. The phrase 'forget it,' in response to an apology can mean 'apology accepted.' But in response to a request for an explanation, it can

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Dismissive Remarks

Organizational expert, consultant and author Rick Brenner catalogs phrases that can convey a dismissive attitude. Almost everyone uses some of them, without realizing their negative effect.

- Never mind.
- Don't worry about it.
- Talk to me later (or sometime).
- Sorry, gotta go.
- Stay focused.
- Ask me later.
- Let's not.
- Send me an email on that.
- It's complicated.
- You're overreacting.
- Could be.
- Who knows? Or cares?
- Oh, that. Let's move on.
- I hear you. (repeatedly)
- Take a number.
- I don't think it's quite that bad.
- That's life.
- Why does that matter?
- Don't be so sensitive.
- Chill.

Find more examples at www.chacocanyon.com/pointlookout/130130.shtml

Your Resident Assistance Program

The RAP newsletter is provided as a benefit to medical residents at the USF Health Morsani College of Medicine and their dependents.

We welcome your comments on newsletter topics, however, we cannot provide RAP services by email.

Gary L. Wood & Associates, P.A.
4700 N. Habana Avenue Suite 300
Tampa, FL 33614
RAP Helpline: 813-870-3344
www.woodassociates.net

Editor

Patricia N. Alexander, Ph.D.
PAlexander@woodassociates.net

Writer

Susan H. Burnell, APR
SusanBurnellAPR@gmail.com

Be Aware of Dismissive Speech and Behavior

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be a dismissive rejection.”

Another example is when someone comes in late to a meeting and the leader says “so glad you could join us, Mr./Ms./Dr. So-and-So.” “It’s even more ‘zingy’ as a dismissive remark when that formal address is used,” Brenner notes.

Small Slightings Can Build Up

The study of microbehavior looks at the small, often unconscious messages people send out and receive when they interact. “No matter what you think you are saying, your tone, facial expressions and hand gestures can communicate something different,” states Ron Beckwith, Ph.D. in a 2009 white paper “Microbehavior in Organizations: Sweating the Small Stuff,” published by The Millennium Group International. Micromessages can be both positive and negative, and because they are small, can be difficult to recognize and address.

When subtle, dismissive micromessages are repeatedly directed at people who are perceived as different, they may fall into the category of “microinequities,” a term coined in the 1970s. Research by MIT Professor Mary P. Rowe found that even unintentional microinequities in the workplace can undermine the confidence of individuals, including women and minorities.

Counteract Dismissive Speech by Reframing

“Targets of dismissiveness usually cannot control the behavior of offenders, but they can learn to remain centered,” Brenner says. Reframing is intentionally changing your perspective, he explains.

“When you observe a dismissive remark directed at you, your initial reaction may be to feel hurt or angry, even if you don’t show it. In reframing, you tell yourself ‘I am not going to experience it that way.’ It takes will, and it seems unnatural at first, but it does work. Instead of sitting there wallowing in hurt, you say to yourself, ‘Hmm. Seems like this person has a problem. This isn’t about me.’”

Brenner continues, “You might repeat to yourself, ‘Well, thank you for announcing that you’ve got a problem.’ Try to tell yourself something funny. Instead of showing anger, you’re reacting with a smile or a laugh. You’re taking responsibility for your own emotional state, and making a conscious choice to do something other than to feel hurt.”

Resources:

- Rick Brenner, Chaco Canyon www.chacocanyon.com
- The Millennium Group International, LLC www.tmgi.net/
- “Micromessaging: Why Great Leadership is Beyond Words” by Stephen Young, McGraw-Hill (2006)