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THE POWER IN “MY”

By: Heather Hermans

The words we use every day can motivate, inspire and educate; they hold energy and power. The words we use also involve the risk of oppression, control and disempowerment. Organizations and service providers are attempting to address negative preconceptions and attitudes about people with disabilities within their structures and processes; however, it is also found in everyday language we as professionals often use without realizing its effects (Jingree, Finlay, Antaki, 2006).

Many people with developmental disabilities have lived their lives owned by others from residential intuitions to community living. The words “my client” and “my resident” take on the ownership of all that this person does and is. The successes, failures and everything in-between are no longer their own but that of the professionals who surround them. This small yet powerful word “my” can take over and remove a person’s humanity.

Individuals with developmental disabilities rely on the care of direct support professionals (DSP) to assist them with daily living tasks, such as bathing, eating, transportation and receiving medication. The need for this direct care makes everyday interactions and conversation with DSPs in significant power imbalance. This power imbalance makes it almost impossible for the person with a developmental disability to object to the terms identified by the professional. Organizations spend many hours and thousands of dollars creating mission statements that empower and ensure rights of people with developmental disabilities. However, our words can create an atmosphere in which people with developmental disabilities are vulnerable and require our care to survive and succeed.

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I was in a meeting with others in a variety of professional roles, and I had just spent the morning discussing with a Member (the person we provide support to) the differences between a girlfriend, friend, and acquaintance. A Member came into the room and was asked to "Give me a minute my friend." My heart sank as I realized we teach people boundaries and roles, but then we do not speak what we teach. We are then known to sit around boardroom tables asking ourselves, "Why aren't they getting it?"

People with developmental disabilities have a significant increase in being vulnerable towards bribes and false promises of friendship due to poverty and isolation. Learning about healthy relationships and boundaries is essential for a person with a developmental disability to be an active member of their community, and many spend hours in classes completing training to do so. This knowledge and autonomy can easily be confusing and misinterpreted by having a professional call them "my friend."

A few weeks ago, a Member was excited about a phone call she received, letting her know she received a favourable response to an interview she recently had. This Member was thrilled to share her news with her support team; however, instead of sharing in her excitement, the DSP expressed concerns that the program was not directly informed, as it was "my idea."

Myths/Tips about our Words and What They Mean

"My Client" – I have the right to know all there is to know about you; financially, medically, socially, spiritually. I have the right to your information without your permission or consent.

- It's important to remember that the person you are supporting has the opportunity to be their agent; empowering them to be an individual providing permission to access any of their information. Using a person's name and involving them as equals helps set the stage for empowerment.

"My House," "My Program" – I control the space around you, what it looks like and what you can access. I control who lives here and who can enter this space.

- You as a professional are a visitor in a person's home. You should seek permission to enter the space each time you come to the front door. Choices as to what their house looks like and who has access to it should always be provided. You are working within the home of the people you support, respecting this also supports boundaries and healthy relationships.

"My Way" – I decide how you will do things, and the way I will teach you to do things.

- There are many ways to complete and teach a task; providing options and choices and finding out preferred styles and strengths encourages autonomy.

"My Opinion" – I know best, and I will teach you to follow my values. I will decide what is best for you.

- Providing information in an accessible way so informed decisions are made takes your opinion and values out of the situation.

"My Friend" – You are vulnerable and should be pitied. You can't have real friends so I will pretend to be one for you.

- Professionals are not friends, no matter how long you have known the person or how well you get along. It is your role as a professional to be able to ensure you don't confuse these two relationships. By ignoring that professions should not be friends also allows us to ignore how isolated and lonely people with disabilities can be.

“My Idea” – I get the credit for your successes; if it weren't for me, you wouldn't be able to do this.

- Your role is to support and provide choices. The choices made and the results that come from these choices belong to the person who made them and no one else.

“My Family” – I am part of the intimate family dynamics; I have a right to be made aware of all that goes on within and about this group of people. I am involved and have a relationship with everyone within this group.

- You are one of many professionals who come in and out of a family's experiences. You are not part of their inner family circle. Their information, their history, and their future belong to only them.

When society witnesses government-funded agencies and professionals using words that are supporting oppression of disabled people, it becomes a form of psy-knowledge, and the general public becomes influenced to believe that these beliefs are accurate and in good moral judgment. The development of national and international laws and legislation is essential to ensure human rights for people with disabilities; however, as other rights movements have proven in history, community attitudes and interactions can be the most difficult to change (Scully 2010). To have full participation within their community, people with developmental disabilities need to be able to be the sole owners of their successes and their failures, and to identify their own relationships and boundaries.

Tips for Helping Set Boundaries

When someone you support says, **“You are my friend” or “I love you,”** it can be an awkward moment knowing how to respond.

- Never dismiss a person's feelings; their feelings are real, however, may be more about the situation than you. Responding in a way that reflects the moment or experience you have shared can be helpful in these situations: **“I had a great time hanging out with you today at the park too.”**
- Work with them outside of these comments to identify people in their lives and their relationships: **“What role and boundaries does your sister have that are different from your staff?”**
- Help set the stage to build genuine friendships and relationships so they don't need to turn to professionals to fill this role. Assist them to be involved in community activities on a routine basis and have accessible ways to connect with people.

- Setting and keeping clear boundaries from the start makes things easier and clearer for everyone involved. It shows respect for the people you support, their families and for your professional role.

There is power in the words we use and acknowledging this is an important step. We need to remember that our words need to reflect the goals of the disability community and the people we support. We will all stumble and say the wrong thing even if you are a veteran advocate; no one is without error in their words. The important thing is to acknowledge when we have stumbled and when others give us misplaced power with their words and correct it. Recognizing how our words have power and can provide power back is the beginning of ensuring that mission statements, laws and legislation are not only written words, they are our spoken words as well.

About the author

Heather Hermans has worked for over 25 years with people with developmental disabilities. Heather has led numerous teams in supporting people with a variety of needs transition from institutional settings into community and treatment settings. A Developmental Service Worker graduate with a post-graduate certificate in Teaching and Training Adults, she continues her education as a student of the Disabilities Studies Undergraduate Program at Ryerson University in Toronto.

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