

In the interest of maintaining the highest standard of care and leaving no stone unturned in our pursuit of excellence we offer...

The Importance of Swearing in Mental Health Care

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Goals

By the end of discussion you will...hopefully.

- Appreciate the complex nature of human swearing and profanity
- Understand it's diverse role in communication particularly health care
- Understand how it is related to other forms of communication neuroanatomically
- Appreciate it's enhanced ability to improve or damage communication dynamics and some of the consequences
- Get all of you really excited about swearing!
- Maybe help you survive prison...if you ever need to.

How I got onto this topic?

What's good for goose not good for gander.

- Manic patient swearing profusely correcting me for gentle swearing.

DISCLOSURES

- No disclosures to report other than I have sworn on one or two occasions.
- This talk is dedicated to...well you know who you are.

Just how taboo is swearing in professional setting?

- I was teaching a course and offered several clinical vignettes. In one of the vignettes a patient swore. The department chair informed me that, “We can’t have profanity in vignettes.”
- I responded, “Look, swearing in mental health is like nudity in surgery. It’s uncomfortable but you have to get used to it. A provider has to feel comfortable with it and use it from time to time.”
- She answered, “By that analogy, does a surgeon have to occasionally get naked with their patients?”
- “All right you may have a point,” I answered.

Just how taboo is swearing in professional/public setting?

- So taboo that the origin and history of many swear words is lost because of refusal to print or study them.
- Still, in this earliest Judaic form misusing the name of God was blasphemy and the penalty was **stoning to death**.
- For many years people who refused to “swear” on the bible or were atheists were not allowed to give testimony in court.

Will He or Won't He?

- I know you're all wondering just how far I'm going to go in this talk.
- Considered giving the entire talk in Ned Flander's Speak
- It's kind of like the movie, "The Full Monty."
- Are they REALLY going to do that in public?
- We'll see.

Swearing does NOT equal pathology

- Should go without saying...but swearing and profanity are a part of more private yet perfectly normal human communication and not reserved solely to frontal lobe dysfunction, disinhibition, drug use, internet gaming disorder, antisocial behavior, or frustrated bureaucracy syndrome.
- In some ways more related to music, humor, cheering, and sports.

What is Swearing

Swearing refers to the use of specific, “*negatively*” charged and often **emotionally loaded** terms, which are taboo in a given language/culture and thus have strong potential to cause offence (Karyn et al., 2022)

Not sure all swearing is “negatively charged”

- “Hell yeah!”
- “Daaaammnn!”

What is swearing?

Two Meanings (Promise vs. Profanity)

PROMISE

vow
stat under oath
solemnly affirm
pledge oneself
give one's word
take an oath
swear an oath
swear on the Bible
give an undertaking
undertake
warrant
state
assert

PROFANITY

cussing
cursing
blaspheming
ranting
railing
damning
reviling
fulminating

Meanings Linked

PROMISE VS. PROFANITY

Original Swear Words Were Curses

Later evolved into other culturally related taboos.

When I was first caught swearing with my friends as a kid my dad said to me, “If people didn’t have swear words they would come up with something so disgusting that no one wanted to hear it.”

Swearing = Intellect? Honest? Creativity?

- Swearing may also be a sign of intelligence, is associated with less lying and deception at the individual level and higher integrity at the society level, and may be a sign of creativity(Feldman, G. et al., 2017)
- Looked at **verbal and profanity fluency** as well as swearing by geography. **Which state swears the most?**
- I can say what a privilege it is to work with some of the smartest , honest, and creative people I know here in the mental health service.
- The honesty bit was challenged by a review of deVries in 2023. (de Vries RE, et al., 2023)

This isn't your father's, "Damn it!"

- While swearing has been considered a predominately masculine activity, women now tend to swear as much, or even more often, than men (Vingerhoets, 2013)

Swearing in First Language More Effective... as catharsis

“People often associate swearing with catharsis – the release of strong emotion. It is undeniably different from – and more powerful than – other forms of language use. Interestingly, for speakers of more than one language, the catharsis is nearly always greater when swearing in one’s first language than any languages learned subsequently.(Karyn et al., 2022)

Swearing in First Language More Effective... as Insults.

Dewaele, J. M. (2004). The Emotional Force of Swearwords and Taboo Words in the Speech of Multilinguals. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 25(2–3), 204–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630408666529>

Doctors Swear

- Studied surgeons. Orthopedics once every 29 minutes were the highest.
- Palazzo FF, Warner OJ. Surgeons swear when operating: fact or myth? BMJ. 1999 Dec 18-25;319(7225):1611. doi: 10.1136/bmj.319.7225.1611. PMID: 10600960; PMCID: PMC28308.

Swear words in every language

- Including Tibetan.
- So yes, as the Tibetan Monks were tortured they probably dropped a few choice phrases because....

Increases Pain Tolerance

Repeating a swear word vs. non-taboo increases time allowed in icy water.

Stephens R, Robertson O. Swearing as a Response to Pain: Assessing Hypoalgesic Effects of Novel "Swear" Words. *Front Psychol.* 2020 Apr 30;11:723. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00723. PMID: 32425851; PMCID: PMC7204505.

Increases Pain Tolerance to Cold Water

Had a case of this. Amphetamine-dependent patient came in requesting help to stop from using. Refused hospital and didn't want to take medication. I suggested cold-water therapy which is shown to increase and steady dopamine levels.

He did it with success but then returned the next day stating, "I'd never sworn like that before. It was like a new level of profanity, stringing together combinations of curses I'd never even imagined."

Increases Pain Tolerance to Cold Water

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When I told my wife this story she said, “Someone should have told the labor and delivery nurses that when they told me to keep my voice down!”

Essentially is a sympathetic load...

Studies have shown that swearing provokes an autonomic response, assessed via increased heart rate ([Stephens et al., 2009](#); [Stephens and Umland, 2011](#)) and increased skin conductance ([LaBar and Phelps, 1998](#); [Jay et al., 2008](#); [Bowers and Pleydell-Pearce, 2011](#)). It is the emotion-provoking aspect of swearing that is thought to underlie this increase in autonomic arousal ([Stephens and Allsop, 2012](#)).

Hulk...damn angry.

Swearing Increases Strength

- “Greater maximum performance was observed in the swearing conditions compared with the non-swearing conditions for WAnT power (Experiment #1; $d_z = 0.618$, $p = 0.002$) and hand grip strength (Experiment #2; $d_z = 0.962$, $p < 0.001$). However, swearing did not affect cardiovascular or autonomic function assessed via heart rate, heart rate variability, blood pressure and skin conductance.” (Stephens et. al 2018)

So we can see power of swearing...but

How do patients feel about Doctors Swearing?

Study 1 N=447 (Perrault et al., 2022)

- Doctor in the course of examining a patients wound said,
- “You’ve got a lot of nasty SH#T in there we’re going to flush out!
- or
- “You’ve got a lot of nasty stuff in there we’re going to flush out!”

How do patients feel about doctors swearing?

Study 2 (n=1224)

- Swearing when dropping papers in a patient's presence while varying the intensity of a swear (i.e., "[Sh#t!/Damn!/Whoops!]", with or without an apology (i.e., "I'm sorry"). (Perrault et al., 2022)

Findings

- Swearing doctor generally seen **less likable**, and in Study 1, **less trustworthy**, approachable, and **less of an expert**.
- However, the majority of participants exposed to a swearing doctor still said they would visit that physician again. Open-ended responses from these participants revealed that they perceived a swearing doctor as **more human**.
- Results from Study 2 also found that if a doctor swore, the **negative impact was lessened if the doctor apologized immediately** after cursing. While results from these studies indicate it is wise for doctors to refrain from swearing, most participants were still willing to make a future appointment with a cursing doctor. (Perrault et al., 2022)

Have a bit of a problem with this

- This is swearing in a **negative** situation.
- It's a little different than your cancer doctor walking in, giving you a high five and saying, "Hell yeah...you are cancer free!"

Doesn't Matter Who Swears First in Therapy

(Karonski, 2023)

- Results suggest that a therapist refraining from swearing during a session in hopes of preserving a client's impression of them may not need to do so, since the conditions with the therapist swearing had therapist impression ratings that were statistically insignificant from the conditions with the therapist not swearing.

Doesn't Matter in Therapy...both if it happens and who says it first

(Karonski 2023)

- This differs from the results of previous studies that found therapist swearing to be unfavorable (Heubusch & Horan, 1977; Paradise et al., 1980; Sazer & Kassino, 1991) but aligns with Kurklen and Kassino's (1991) results of participant ratings of therapists not differing between swearing and non-swearing conditions.

Why are there so many mixed messages regarding swearing?

Swear Word Usage is Complex

- Taboo English words often flexibly assume different grammatical classes, metaphorical usage, infixation, compounding, and lexical hybridization (Bergen, 2016; Jay, 2009)

Swearing is Complex

Multiple Types (Pinker, S. 2007)

- Dysphemistic
- Idiomatic
- Abusive
- Emphatic
- Cathartic swearing

Swearing is complex

Dysphemistic...opposite of euphemism

- Urges the listeners to think about negative or provocative matter, since it is the opposite of euphemism. “Go to the bathroom” vs. “Take a sh#t”

Swearing is Complex

Idiomatic Swearing

- idiomatic
- Idiomatic swearing is the swearing without really referring to the matter, just
- using the words to arouse interest, to show off, and express to peers that the setting is informal. For example, 'Damn, man.'

Swearing is complex

Abusive Swearing

- Self Explanatory
- Abusive swearing is the swearing which creates abuse or intimidation or insulting of others. For example,
- ‘You m#@th#rf#cking s(n of a b#\$ch’
- ‘F#\$k y^u a\$\$h\$le!’
- I think it means people are more of a threat.

Swearing is complex

Emphatic Swearing

- emphatic
- Emphatic swearing is the swearing which is to emphasize something or to show that it is quite surprising.
- For example, 'It was so f#\$%ng big!'.

Swearing is complex

Cathartic swearing

- Uttered when something bad happens like glass breaking, milk spilling, and so on. It may cause people curse. One evolutionary theory asserts it is meant to tell the audience that you're undergoing a negative emotion. For example, 'Aww shucks!, Damn this milk!'

Analyzed in Classic Cinema (Breakfast Club)

- *“Likewise, the character of Bender, who comes from working-class family background (lower class), tends to swear more than the character of Brian, who comes from high class family background (upper class). Bender’s swearword utterances tend to be abusive and dysphemistic swearing, while Brian’s swearword utterances tend to be emphatic and idiomatic swearing.” (Amalia, 2015)*

Analyzed in Classic Cinema (Deadpool)

(Khoirunnisa et al., 2017)

- The findings of this research show that there were seven categories of swear words used by the characters in Deadpool movie, such as **intensifier** category, exclamation of **annoyance** category, an **insult** category, exclamation of **surprised** category, **rejection** category, surprised question category, and the last is intensifier of **unconcern** category.

Compounding is Complex

Reiley et al., 2020

- Examined various combinations and tested them with effectiveness. Took swear words combined with nouns and rated their effectiveness. They eliminated words already used in well-known profanities (e.g. -hat, -hole) in favor of neutral words like balloon, baby and tool.
- Short words with potentially organic interpretations also seem to work (-sack, -rod, -stick). Receptacles appeared to be effective. “If you can put something in something, people think that’s a good compound, like -hat, -hole, -bucket,”

Compounding is Complex

Reiley et al., 2020

- “You'll hear things like ‘ass clown,’ which works as an insult. But something like ‘ass sink’ doesn't,” says Alexandra Kelly, a research technician on the team.
- You wonder why nerds used to get beat up on the playground.
- If you go to prison, and they are sizing you up for vulnerability...please don't use the term “ass sink.”

Swearing is emotional

Swearing is emotional (Chun et al., 2015)

Dysfunction of the frontolimbic region during swear word processing in young adolescents with Internet gaming disorder

- In this study, the activity of the medial OFC in response to swear words may be explained by the involvement of the OFC in the automatic emotion regulation related to reward monitoring.(Eliot et al., 2000)

Swearing is Social

Swearing is Social

- Furthermore, in response to swear words, we found activity in the right superior temporal sulcus, right temporoparietal junction and temporal pole, brain regions known to be involved in social cognition. (Gallagher et al., 2003) (Kramer et al., 2010) (Olson et al., 2007)

Process Semantic & Emotional Messages Differently (Vingerhoets et al., 2003)

- Cerebral hemodynamics during discrimination of prosodic and semantic emotion in speech studied by transcranial Doppler ultrasonography. 36 right-handed volunteers who were instructed to identify the emotion conveyed by prosody or semantics of a number of sentences.
- Semantics Left Brain
- Emotion Both

We Respond Strongly to Strong Emotional and Social Cues

- High Five Habit (Dopamine Release). Orbital prefrontal cortex
- Talk to the hand
- Middle Finger
- What do you want? (Che vuoi?)
- When an Italian pinches the fingers of one hand together and moves the hand quickly, they are asking ma che vuoi? (“What do you want?”). This gesture conveys exasperation or frustration and adds emphasis to the annoyance.
- (Otten et al., 2016) Insults hurt worse when crowd laughter applied.

STRONG EMOTION IN PUBLIC IS TABOO/UNPROFESSIONAL

- SUPERMARKET I WAS SURPRISED WHEN A PATIENT SHOUTED DOWN THE AISLE ABOUT THE MARKED IMPROVEMENT IN HIS SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION SINCE BEING PLACED ON VIAGRA

There's a lot of other ways providers can really annoy patients

- Yawning
- Typing during session
- Calling a patient a “rhino”

Taking Offense

- Challenging of honor no less of an intense issue. Also culturally dependent
 - Throwing down gauntlet...duels..etc.
-
- Mosquera P. M. R., Manstead A. S. R., Fischer A. H. (2002). The role of honour concerns in emotional reactions to offences. *Cogn. Emot.* 16 143–163. 10.1080/02699930143000167

Do people get used to insulting language

- Marijn E. Struiksma and Hannah N. M. De Mulder and Jos J. A. van Berkum. Do people get used to insulting language. *Frontiers in Communication*. 2022.
- Get used to compliments not insults

What do AI say about doctors cursing?

- The use of curse words or profanity by medical professionals is a topic that warrants discussion. While freedom of speech is a fundamental right, it is essential to consider the context, especially in a professional setting like healthcare. Here are a few reasons why doctors should **refrain** from using curse words:
 - 1. Professionalism and Respect
 - 2. Communication Clarity
 - 3. Patient Comfort and Trust
 - 4. Role Model:
 - 5. Workplace Culture:

What do AI say about doctors cursing?

- In conclusion, while doctors, like all individuals, may occasionally use curse words in their personal lives, it is **generally advisable** to maintain a professional language standard within the medical setting. This not only enhances the doctor-patient relationship but also contributes to a more respectful and efficient workplace.

Risks of Swearing

Offense may be greater by physician

- Significance of the offender and the role in the life of the offended can impact the intensity of the feeling of offense with greater offense coming from those held in high esteem. (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdel, & Schwarz, 1996).

Risks of Swearing

Increased bonding?

- Boundary Issues

TBI Patient

Controlling behavior through controlling language

- Used stop swearing as way to control emotions and behavior.
- Did he lose the ability to compound swear?

Conclusions

Swearing is complex and powerful

- Swear words might most appropriately be thought of as powerful emotional and socially dependent communication terms.
- Their use in conventional society is going to be frowned upon like any dramatic display of emotion in a controlled setting (high five in church or laughing outburst in a lecture).
- At worst they should be thought of something that occur but should not get in the way of therapeutic relationships and at best an added tool to be respected but used appropriately.

Final Case

- Forty-four year old veteran comes into your office and telling you a number of trauma stories complaining that he feels like system has let him down stating, “You know, I’ve been through blood and guts and sh#t and all horrible things. It would just be nice to know that someone in the god d#mn system gives a f\$ck.”

You could say...

- “I give a darn.”
- “While I don’t approve of your language I do care about what happens to you.”
- or maybe.....

QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION

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