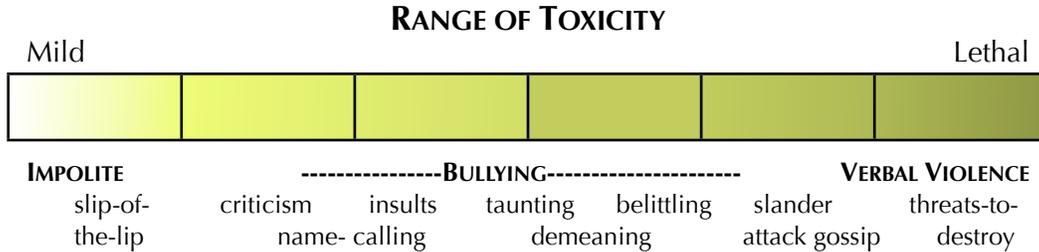




TOXIC LANGUAGE

by Anne E. McTavish

What is “toxic language”? It's language that hurts; it's aggressive language. It can range from a mild slip-of-the-lip through to a lethal death threat.



Like all toxins, toxic language causes an adverse reaction in those who hear, read or see it.¹ It can be as mild as a slight irritation or as strong as outright terror.

When we deal with physical toxins — whether the toxins affect our health, our environment or both — we need to know what the toxin is so that we can use the proper remedy. It's the same with toxic language. Just as we wouldn't call in the Hazmat Team to deal with a can of oil that spills on your garage floor, we don't treat someone who nags us as if they had threatened to beat us to a pulp. Just as we can mop up the spilled oil and wash the garage floor, we can either ignore the nagging person or walk away.

Toxic language is aggressive language. And what is aggression? Dr. John W. Renfrew defines it as:

AGGRESSION is a behaviour that is directed by an organism toward a target, resulting in damage.²

In other words, aggression is behaviour that hurts someone or something. Speaking, writing and the signing of sign language are *language behaviours*. When what is said, written or signed hurts someone, that's **AGGRESSIVE LANGUAGE**.

Aggressive language is not necessarily abusive. Imagine you're walking along and hear a woman yelling and swearing at a child. You turn to see what's going on. If you see a small child running into a busy street, you understand why the woman is yelling: she's trying to get the child to stop because she can't reach out and pull the child away from the street. Yes, it's aggressive language, but it's not abusive. If she spoke normally, the child would not hear her; she needs to be loud and to shock the child into stopping. There is no time for explanations. The yelling might also alert the drivers to the dangerous situation and if they hear her, they might stop. Yelling is the only thing she can do.

However, if when you turn you see the woman holding the child while she yells, that is verbal abuse because it is excessive, as well as unfair. She does not need to yell; the child can hear her if she were to speak normally. It's also bullying.

Aggressive language is language that hurts someone, no matter how it is delivered or conveyed, and regardless of whether the speaker intended to hurt or not. Imagine someone calmly says that you're ugly. Of course you will be hurt and embarrassed; it doesn't matter that they said it calmly. It's the meaning of the words that hurts, whether found in the words themselves or the tone of voice. Another example: someone tells you that the outfit you're wearing today is so much better than what you wore yesterday. They meant it as a compliment, but you felt the veiled criticism of what you wore before.

Toxic language harms those who hear, read or see it. It doesn't matter whether the speaker deliberately uses words as weapons or accidentally wounds; it is still toxic language. Of course



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we deal differently with accidental wounds than with deliberate wounds, even if the same treatment is needed for both. If someone unwittingly says something to you that is rude, it is not appropriate, or effective, to treat them as if they deliberately went out of their way to be rude and insult you.

You will probably recognize many of the forms toxic language can take.

TYPES OF TOXIC LANGUAGE

	TYPE	WORDS	NON-VERBALS	INTENTION	ATTACKED		
	Irritating Talk Irritates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> intrusive impolite extremes horrible-izing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> extra stresses strong stresses loud non-stop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unintentional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CHOICE matters TURF matters 		
	Malpractice of the Mouth Embarrasses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> slip-of-the-lip impolite 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accidental Careless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TURF matters FACE issues 		
F i s t F u l l L a n g u a g e ™	Verbal Abuse Level 1 Stings	B U L L Y I N G	HOSTILE LANGUAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> highly personal — you vs. me extremes always, never horrible-izing demonizing extra stresses “edgy” tone of voice aggressive facial expression aggressive gestures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TURF matters FACE issues SOUL matters Identity Core needs Belonging, family, friends Basic needs Target, family, friends Existence Being a human being 		
	Verbal Abuse Level 2 Insults					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> rude highly critical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliberate Harm intended
	Verbal Abuse Level 3 Mistreats					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> insults name-calling trash talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Harm known Focussed
	Verbal Violence Level 1 Poisons					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> taunting belittling demeaning cruel jokes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal to harm is primary Planned
	Verbal Violence Level 2 Destroys					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> attack gossip slander demonizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal to harm is overriding Harm to target is calculated Aim is to victimize Premeditated

Let’s look at descriptions and definitions of the various types of toxic language.

UNINTENTIONAL TOXIC LANGUAGE

- ★ **IRRITATING TALK** is *unintentional*, impolite **NATTERING** or **NAGGING**. Someone who runs off at the mouth (nattering) just wants to keep giving you information. Someone who keeps talking about one topic (nags) just wants you to get their message about a topic they consider to be all-important.
- ★ **MALPRACTICE OF THE MOUTH**³ is the *negligent use of language*. It has three elements: (1) the obligation to be polite, (2) its breach (i.e., impoliteness), and (3) harm (embarrassment or shame). In short, Malpractice of the Mouth is an unintentional breach of politeness that



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causes harm. Typically, it's an impolite slip-of-the-lip or a statement that is inadvertently rude.

INTENTIONAL TOXIC LANGUAGE

A **VERBAL ATTACK** is intentionally aggressive language chosen to hurt or to cause pain to the target.⁴ The speaker chooses words that will hurt the target. Words can also be delivered in such a way that the words inflict pain when heard or read. The speaker intends to hurt the target and chooses words and delivers them so they will hurt the target. This **GOAL TO HARM** is a key feature of all Verbal Attacks which can — and do — provoke physical attacks. Verbal Attacks are not random; they are focussed and directed to a specific target.

Verbal Attacks are categorized according to how severe the attack is and how it is delivered. The different levels of Verbal Abuse and Verbal Violence measure how severe the attack is.

✦ **VERBAL ABUSE** is *intentionally aggressive language that is unfair and excessive*, directed by the speaker to another person (the target) who doesn't deserve the attack, with the goal of harming the target to manipulate the target and/or to gain or keep control of the situation.

Verbal Abuse is a Verbal Attack on steroids. It carries a punch. Words are used like fists to inflict pain.

✦ **VERBAL ABUSE LEVEL 1 *stings***: deliberately rude language, negative criticism

✦ **VERBAL ABUSE LEVEL 2 *insults***: name-calling, trash talk, humiliating comments, insults

✦ **VERBAL ABUSE LEVEL 3 *mistreats***: taunting, belittling, cruel jokes, put-downs

✦ **VERBAL VIOLENCE** is the *deliberately calculated use of hostile, aggressive language* directed by the speaker (the attacker) to another person (the victim) to seriously damage or destroy the victim, their family or friends by threatening to physically harm or kill them, to destroy their image or reputation, or to damage or destroy their opportunities for work or sources of income.

Verbal Violence is the extreme Verbal Attack. It's vicious. When the speaker wants to hurt their target, they use Verbal Abuse. When they want to damage or destroy their target, they use Verbal Violence. Words are used as lethal weapons — like verbal hand grenades. The words are deliberately chosen because of the harm they will inflict. The whole purpose of the exercise is to inflict punishment or otherwise damage the target.

✦ **VERBAL VIOLENCE LEVEL 1 *poisons***: attack gossip, slander, demonizing the other person

✦ **VERBAL VIOLENCE LEVEL 2 *destroys***: threats to physically hurt or kill someone, threats to destroy a person's reputation, threats to damage or destroy the victim's job or opportunities for work

A Verbal Attack can be delivered directly or indirectly.

✦ **DIRECT VERBAL ATTACKS** are easy to **RECOGNIZE**: belittling, badgering, smart remarks, off-colour or cruel jokes, name-calling, obscenities, demeaning comments, put downs, trash talk.

✦ **INDIRECT VERBAL ATTACKS** aren't as easy to **RECOGNIZE**, because they are hidden or disguised. Sometimes they are disguised as a compliment, as in, "My, your hair looks so much better today." Ouch. We usually pick up on most **INDIRECT ATTACKS** fairly quickly, because they do hurt. We mentally discount our hurt because we buy into the disguise. In this example, we didn't defend ourselves because it was a "compliment". **VERBAL ATTACK PATTERNS** are a type of **INDIRECT ATTACK** that we usually don't recognize as an attack.



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Here is a very brief outline of positive options for dealing with toxic language.

TOXIC LANGUAGE					
	TYPE		WORDS	YOUR REACTION	POSITIVE CHOICES
	Irritating Talk <i>Irritates</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intrusive • impolite • extremes • horrible-izing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annoyed • Irritated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignore - continue with your topic. • Change topic. • Simple denial - "No, that's not it. Now as I was saying, . . ." • Walk away.
	Malpractice of the Mouth <i>Embarrasses</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • slip-of-the-lip • impolite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embarrassed • Flustered 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignore - continue with your topic. • Change topic. • Simple denial - "No, that's not it. Now as I was saying, . . ." • And accept any apology given.
F	Verbal Abuse Level 1 <i>Stings</i>	B U L L Y I N G	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rude • highly critical 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hurt • Don't deserve the attack 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't attack back. • Don't argue. • Don't debate. • Deal with the hidden attack. • Don't get side-tracked. • Keep your focus on the main topic. • Stay calm and go into Observer Mode. • Listen, unless all they're doing is verbally attacking you. • If they're criticizing you, listen for their real concern so you can try and Work It Out.
i s t	Verbal Abuse Level 2 <i>Insults</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • insults • name-calling • trash talk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberate • Harm intended 	
F u l l	Verbal Abuse Level 3 <i>Mistreats</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • taunting • belittling • demeaning • cruel jokes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harm known • Focussed 	
L a n g u a	Verbal Violence Level 1 <i>Poisons</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attack gossip • slander • demonizing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal to harm is primary • Planned 	
g e ™	Verbal Violence Level 2 <i>Destroys</i>	B E U L L Y I N G	threats to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • physically hurt • kill • destroy reputation • damage or destroy work opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal to harm is overriding • Harm to target is calculated • Aim is to victimize • Premeditated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the threat is to physically hurt you or to kill you, call the police to protect you and hire a lawyer to get a restraining order. • If the threat is to destroy your reputation or damage or destroy your work opportunities, hire a lawyer to get the courts dealing with the situation.



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BULLYING AND TOXIC LANGUAGE

Verbal Attacks are always toxic language and fall into two categories: Verbal Abuse and Verbal Violence. **VERBAL ATTACKS** use *intentionally aggressive language*, and the words and/or tone of voice are chosen to hurt the target.⁵

Bullying uses intentional, toxic language. **BULLYING** is intentionally aggressive behaviour that's objectively excessive or unnecessary, or both, that intimidates, dominates, manipulates or socially attacks the target. Bullying and verbal abuse overlap. Bullying can be, but doesn't have to be, excessive aggression; it can be unnecessary. Verbal abuse is always more aggressive than the situation calls for and is rarely necessary. Verbal aggression that's unfair and more than what's called for (i.e., unnecessary and excessive) is both verbal abuse and bullying.

Bullying is a social attack because it strikes at the target's sense of who they are and where they belong in this world.

SOCIAL ATTACKS AND ATTACK GOSSIP

✦ **SOCIAL ATTACKS** are attacks on the target's social group(s): the family, the peer group, the work group, the friendship group, any social grouping that people may form. Social Attacks strike at a core human need: the need to belong. Social Attacks are very serious.

In many tribes around the world, social ostracism is the most extreme form of punishment The translation for this punishment often refers to death ... as in "social death." William James (1897) referred to the terror of being ignored and excluded as being "cut dead."⁶

- ✦ Isolating someone from the group, ostracizing them, is a Social Attack.
- ✦ Rejecting someone, shutting them out and excluding them from the social group are also Social Attacks.
- ✦ Bullying is used to force the target to do/say or not do/say something (manipulation and control). Bullying attacks the target's sense of where they belong and who they are because a large part of our identity is who we are in our relationships with others and which groups we belong to. Bullying is used to isolate the target and to damage their reputation and social identity. We only need to think about the bullied students who commit suicide (bullycide) to end their torment to understand how devastating a Social Attack can be.

✦ **ATTACK GOSSIP** is the intentional, deliberate spreading of information (whether true or false) to cause harm to another person. It is one of the most potent weapons for anyone who wants to seriously harm another person. It aims to cut a person off from the "in" group or from the larger group. Attack Gossip is corrosive, eating away at its target like acid or poison. It allows a bully to hurt the target and to hide that they're the one who started it all. The bully uses other people to do their dirty work, knowing or not caring that as the words are repeated, they will get distorted — which will hurt the target more, make it harder for the target to defend themselves, and allow the bully to say, "But I never said *that!*" Attack Gossip causes harm; it's aggressive.

My hope is that by setting out the range of toxic language *behaviours* and describing their characteristics, you will be able to handle toxic language situations safely and more effectively when it happens.

For more information and links, please visit our website at www.FistFreeLanguage.com. You can contact the author through the website and at info@FistFreeLanguage.com.



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Toxic language is not limited to spoken or written language. It can also be signed, as it is in the sign languages. Toxic language is about the message — what's said, written or signed, and how it's delivered. Tone of voice and body language can change the meaning of the words that are used. When I use the term “speaker”, I include the person who is signing in any sign language exchange.
- 2 John W. Renfrew, Ph.D., *Aggression and its Causes: A Biopsychosocial Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 6. You can use “animal” or “person” instead of Dr. Renfrew’s technical term “organism”.
- 3 “Malpractice of the Mouth” is a term that Dr. Suzette Haden Elgin uses in her *GENTLE ART OF VERBAL SELF-DEFENSE*. As a lawyer, I have focussed on the “malpractice” part and modified the usage accordingly.
- 4 Based on the definition of aggression found in the text by Elliot Aronson, Timothy D. Wilson, Robin M. Akert and Beverley Fehr, *Social Psychology*, 3rd Canadian edition, (Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007) at p. 357.
- 5 See note 4 above.
- 6 Kipling D. Williams and Lisa Zadro, “Ostracism: The Indiscriminate Early Detection System” being Chapter 2 in *The Social Outcast: Ostracism, Social Exclusion, Rejection, and Bullying* edited by Kipling D. Williams, Joseph P. Forgas and William von Hippel (New York: Psychology Press, 2005) at p. 23.



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