

## Choose Your Words Wisely When It Comes to Alzheimer's and COVID-19

By Trish Laub, guest article for Being Patient, Words Matter series, April 7, 2020

In January 2020, few had heard the word Covid-19. Only weeks later, it became an official word in the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Its denotation, or its literal definition, is *a highly infectious and potentially severe respiratory disease caused by a new coronavirus*.

It's just a single word, but the mere mention of the word evokes a strong feeling, perhaps panic or dread. That shows the power of words, as most words evoke a feeling when heard or read. If I've learned anything on my care journey, it is that words matter, even in the calm times --and especially in regard to those living with Alzheimer's. In this extraordinary time of uncertainty and greater challenge caused by Covid-19, words are critical.

Our choice of words is powerful in determining whether information is processed as positive or negative. We know that words can help or hurt, but what causes the difference? It is the connotation of a word, what the word suggests, that creates an emotional response that is either positive, neutral or negative.

For example, the words slim, scrawny and svelte have the same denotation, yet very different connotations causing different emotional reactions. Why does this matter? Our emotional response evokes a reaction in both the body and brain, causing calm and other positive feelings vs negativity or fear to the point of fight or flight, which can directly affect our physical, mental and emotional well-being.

We need to start by being accurate in what we say. For example, the statement that "Alzheimer's is a fight," implies that it is a persistent, life-altering inconvenience and elicits a feeling of defeat. The alternative "Alzheimer's is a challenge," indicates that it is an obstacle that can be overcome and result in a feeling of accomplishment. A problem may be met with fear, anxiety and dread, while a challenge can be met with hope and creativity.

The same is true when speaking about Covid-19. Discussing the "stay at home" and quarantine orders, consider the difference between saying "We are stuck at home," compared with "We are staying safe at home."

Rather than communicating that "Covid-19 is life-threatening," it is truthful to say that "Covid-19 is a bad bug for which everything is being done to contain it." Both are true statements with very different connotations.

Additionally, the use of the word "and" is a powerful tool. "Covid-19 is a bad bug AND we are safe," or "Covid-19 causes fear, AND we have guidance on avoiding infection." Using the word "and" allows for acknowledgement of a more negative emotional truth combined with a positive truth or empowerment in order to temper the overall negative impact of the statement, leaving the recipient on a positive note.

As we continue to strive to evoke a sense of safety and connection in those living with Alzheimer's, we must be mindful of how we communicate. A lack of awareness and sensitivity in our choice of words, allowing them to be inaccurate or fear causing, creates a negative connotation and feeds the fear. By shifting our language to be accurate, sensitive and positive, we can instill a sense of wellbeing.

In a culture based on too little time and sound bites, it is easy to speak without consciousness about the use of our words, to speak on autopilot. Carefully selecting your words may seem like playing a game of semantics. The reality is that each word you choose affects you and those to whom you speak physically, mentally and emotionally.

It is therefore your choice as to whether your language has a positive or negative affect on the body, brain, health and wellbeing of yourself and the person living with Alzheimer's. Words have the power to help or to hurt, to create fear or a sense of safety during an uncertain time. Words matter, choose them wisely.

*Trish Laub is the author of [The Comfort in their Journey](#) book series. This article is part of the [Words Matter series](#), in which she discusses language, communication and the way it affects those living with Alzheimer's or cognitive impairment.*