

## WORDS THAT HEAL

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### SUMMARY

*The value of words in the healing process runs constant to the path of therapeutic treatment, the net of exchanges and relationships between brain chemistry and the right words in order to heal is subtle and intricate. Psychotherapy, a treatment with words, is shown to be a treatment that directly affects the brain and that is able to change it stably, even in its anatomical structure and function. According to Kandel (1999), a leading living scientist and Nobel Prize winner for medicine and physiology, American neurologist and psychiatrist, psychotherapy is a real cure, a biological treatment, as it produces behavioral changes through new words and new experiences.*

*The article offers a brief overview of the use of the fantasy of argument, since the time of the classical rethoric of the sophists up to the new rethoric, to illustrate how the structure of the speech, and the dialectic ability of opposing different thoughts, closely resembles the way of thinking.*

*Consequently the choice of words can be considered an instrument of great impact that is inserted in the stream of thoughts that determines the attitude of a person, and therefore, his/her actions. This happens whenever you communicate voluntarily, and not simply when interacting.*

*The right choice of words remains a turning point in all of our relationships, not only in therapeutic situations, but in every other social relationship in life, family or friends.*

**Key words:** words that heal – dysfunctional – relationship - therapeutic

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### IF WE TALK ABOUT OUR LIMITS, THEY WILL BECOME LIMITS

There is a mental process called AIN (Auto Ipnosi Negativa: Negative Self hypnosis) consisting of negative words and defeatist mental images that interfere with our mood, our motivations and our behavior (Haley 1974). This mental process characterizes people that are locked in a negative loop of dysfunctional behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, fears, reactions, plans, impulses, goals, thoughts and feelings.

However, there is the possibility of making a change: the highway that leads to this result is full of different elements (Haley 1974). One of these is the value of the words. The choice of words makes the difference: a past full of a sense of guilt and a future full of fears can be kept alive, or, conversely, the past can be viewed in a constructive way. Words that heal help the thought of a future of potential and change.

Every day we hear, and listen to words that promise, insist, and work out. On the other hand, words used by suffering people are able to hurt, or even to kill. We need to be brave in order to explore these truths, and open a constructive communication system, which is risky if insincere, and be conscious of the power of words that dance with nonchalance over the senselessness of life. Suffering people are sensitive to facial expressions, gestures and tones that sometime disprove the seeming sense of words. Happiness and sense cannot be faked. The choice of right words to use with patients, children, parents, seniors, students, friends or others, begins with the act of listening, which allows us to lead through the mental and emotional spaces of the

words. When there is silence, it leads to the place where it is possible to know people who are able to face pain. The truth, felt by the heart, is buried by words.

Healing communication breaks the perverse ring of a discourse that never comes to a goal, and brings out the experience of confusion, of a debate that can never find an answer, and a path that is going to be a dead end (Verrastro 2004).

Using words that have the power to walk together with those who need to go through the highway of healing is a choice of great ethical value for everyone, but especially for the professionals. We can compare the words that hurt and hurt us to trash: we can choose to incinerate and throw the words that hurt away, in order to let them disappear forever.

'It's impossible', 'I can't', 'I will try', and 'If only', 'but', 'however', 'difficult'. How many times a day do we use terms like these? And still, how many times, just like with knives, we use words that can hurt, sicken, destroy, or simply that do not help and provoke regress, or words that make us sick and can lead to the limits of death? In short, if we acknowledge the power of words, we avoid recklessness, and are more careful about what to say. The more we realize that the use of these words interferes with our psychological well-being, the easier it is to learn to use proper words, and the more we are able to evoke the right thoughts and images (Halliday 1992). We damage the others, and ourselves even more, when we talk about them, and us, in a dysfunctional way.

Therefore, words are very powerful, and can be used to create a variety of different results. There is a creative power in every word, a power that can hurt or heal, and can improve our lives and that of others.

It is said that the first therapist convinced of this power, well known for his capacity of persuasion, was the sophist Antifonte (500 BC). He rented a shop near the market of Corinth to offer his services to afflicted people. He stated that such great pain could not exist that it cannot be relieved by his special speech. Perhaps it is possible to compare the work of modern psychotherapists to that of the ancient sophists. Although, unlike them, some modern professionals still use expressions such as 'patients', 'disease' and 'care', even if the aim is the same: to take care of those who are in a dysfunctional emotional state.

The power of words has been discussed since the art of rhetoric as a discipline of great importance was affirmed in the Western tradition of intellect, from ancient Greece and up to the nineteenth century. Just think of names of great importance, such as Aristotle, Cicero, Erasmus, Augustine and Adam Smith.

With a different point of view, Socrates criticized the moral foundation of the discipline of rhetoric, considering it an argument and not so intellectually serious. In particular, the worry was that it could become an instrument of strong persuasive impact: the power to convey messages in an irresistibly convincing way, no matter what the message was.

Critics argued, in fact, that if it was true that the rhetoricians could have such power of convincing, to the point of being able to turn the worst to the best reason, they could subvert political order and morality.

Similar fears have been expressed in modern times in relation to psychology. In particular the psychology of communication, of persuasive, strategic and hypnotic language, especially about the consequences of knowing and using the hidden secrets of the mind by surpassing the will and consent of the patient, or using that persuasive power through the media.

Modern psychology has also proved that communication is extremely complex, and it is too reductive to say that you can find out the hidden trick to ensure the success of conviction. Even the ancient orators like Cicero agreed, in fact in "De oratore" how young fans of Crassus, an orator of great success, asked him to know the secrets of public speaking.

He replied that the real mystery was common sense and hard work. Modern psychologists have moved past his position, and they have shown how human thought processes are extremely complex.

Protagoras was the first to use the method of refutation, by organizing dialectical disputes, and was the first to be defined as a 'sophist'.

Although we do not have any text written by him today, we can read a very brilliant portrait sketched by Plato, who references some of his famous sentences such as, 'around each topic there are two statements opposing each other' (Diogenes Laertius). This fantasy of argument remains an element of great importance in every communication context, because it allows the selection of the right words in order to achieve fixed goals.

This has also a psychological implication: men are basically equipped with the capacity of having opposing arguments, the 'other assertion' mentioned by Pitagoras. These are critical skills that are able to outline, and at the same time, limit the power of the persuasive communicator, and ensure that the power of the "gold-tongue" speaker is not unlimited.

If we move into a therapeutic context, on one hand it is true that the therapist should possess in his words a 'power' of healing, but it is also true that this 'power' cannot ignore the will of the patient, in whatever situation he/she is in. He, must always 'choose' to use the words (and of course the concepts associated with them) that are presented to him politely, and not given as a medicine. Hence the choice of words can be considered an instrument of effective impact that enters into the stream of thoughts determining the attitudes of a person, and therefore his actions.

Words that heal.

## **THE SOUND OF WORDS IS THE SOUND OF THOUGHTS**

Which are the essential sounds that should be heard in a learning, communicating and a healing context? Maybe they are similar to those heard when the sophists gathered in the markets to talk about the nature of the universe, or during the meeting of rabbis when discussing law. It is the roar of the ideas, the essential sound for the place of thoughts. It can be defined as essential because the sound of thoughts is also the sound of argumentation, of words.

The words: almost a mystery. For centuries, scientists have wondered how we learn to speak. Remarkably, children barely able to walk and eat alone, learn to talk without even knowing the rules of grammar. The linguist Ronald W. Langacker (2000), states that children become masters of the linguistic system before being able to form logical and analytical thinking, and this is a result of indirect and fragmentary evidence. Most scientists believe that learning a language is an innate ability already revealed in the early years of the child.

Initially, however, the brain development of the child is too immature to control the language. This, of course, does not prevent the child from trying. In fact, some researchers think that the babble of a very young child is part of the development of language, a sort of test for the next utterance of the words. While the child tries to talk with vocalisms, the brain functions and its structures rapidly develop in order to learn the language.

Although the development of the baby's body is relatively slow in childhood, at the age of five years his brain already reaches 90% of its adult weight (the adult weight is reached around the 12<sup>th</sup> year). This means that the first two years of life - up to five years old - are especially important in the learning process. In this period, a billion nerve cells grow in the cerebral cortex,

forming a material that is strictly interconnected. Between 15 and 24 months, the nerve cells of the brain grow enormously, and the structures and mental functions are ready for learning the language.

Sally Ward (2004) asserts that today parents talk to children less than in the past because of the big changes in society. For example, a greater number of mothers work, consequently in many homes, television programs have taken the place of conversation. Dennis Child (2004), a professor of education, said: "Language is the most beautiful gift that a human being can have." The awareness of the preciousness of this gift is fundamental to help parents allow their children to develop this expressive instrument effectively. The better the chosen words, the higher the level of effectiveness.

Is it possible to affirm that thinking does not exist without language? Animals, in their world, exchange information without words: birds sing, lions roar, dolphins whistle, and bees dance. Other animals communicate through poses and movements, touch and sound, and even smells. 'Do not come near!' 'Pay attention!' 'Come with me!' These are clear and irrefutable messages of the animal world and are conveyed without words.

Communication between animals, however, is rather limited. Language, on the contrary, allows humans to talk about anything they see or imagine, and allows them to produce positive results in the listeners as well.

"As apples of gold in silver carvings is the word spoken at the right time for it" (Proverbs of Solomon, chapt. 25 verse 11 – Trad. 2006) these words from a king of ancient Israel meant that appropriate words, at the right time, are like a work of art, a beautiful ornament of silver and gold.

## **WORDS TO EXPRESS AND DRESS THE THOUGHTS**

Words, of course, are used to convey information and ideas from one person to another. So, anyone who has a message to communicate, an idea to explain, or has the responsibility of helping a person face a difficult moment, or time, should always be interested in improving their communication skills. Being heard or not depends largely on the way words are expressed and 'fit' related thoughts.

Words produce results, even if in different manners, whether they are pronounced or written. For example, the public repeatedly reads the great literary works, as the great works of music are listened to. Thus, information is imprinted in the mind by repetition. Most people have heard of Shakespeare, for example, even if English is not their mother tongue. Moreover, many people remember better what they have read with pleasure.

So, if the goal is to understand something or convince someone, one needs to tailor the language effectively, both as speakers and as writers. Great literary critics, such as the roman Horatio, the greek Aristotle or

the englishman Samuel Johnson, studied the works of others to find out what made their readings unforgettable. It is actually not easy at all to write effectively and persuasively. Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), for example, said that what a person writes without effort is in general read without pleasure (Clark 1994). Another important aspect is the attitude and the interest towards the interlocutor. Anyone who has or has had some kind of experience in psychological persuasive communication, knows that if we empathically enter in to someone's world of pain the first thing to be done is to recall and feel the pain in first person, in order to choose healing and assertive words.

## **WORDS THAT HEAL**

According to Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974), the principles of strategic thinking can be applied to any problem regardless of the size of the social system in question. This means, in other words, being focused on the solution of problems, and at the same time tickling the psychological and neurological dynamics that are useful to achieve an improvement. This is possible because strategic psychology focuses on the relationships between things and not in things themselves, in how the problems persist and how you can trigger a change rather than why the problems have been formed and why they persist (Verrastro 2004).

The focus in this training course is to understand how the person has previously tried to solve the problems and overcome obstacles in his personal and social life and work, and which solutions have been chosen. A neuropsychological strategic reformulation, through an appropriate selection of words that heal, is highly innovative not only because it gives an explanation for the failures, but mainly because it encourages us to redirect the way of thinking toward the "language of change" (Watzlawick 1993).

In this way, as a natural consequence, it is possible to activate the dynamics and processes useful for the creation of change – oriented plans and strategies. Julius Kuhl (1986) conceptualized the set of processes that can promote or block, the development of mental operations necessary for the reaching of goals, in terms of orientation to action and orientation to the state. The first is the ability to pursue the realization of purposes and it is the result of the self-regulation systems that help concentration, determination, energy, persistence and vision, to work together in harmony; the second is related to the effect of pressures received by hesitations, worries, uncertainties, doubt on decisions, a less determination and an uncertain action.

The person that is action-oriented shows capacity of achieving the optimal use of resources and of achieving goals in accordance with the decisions taken. On the other hand, the state - oriented – person is tormented by constant second thoughts, hesitations, fears, that distract the mind from the pursuit of the goals (Caprara 1996).

However, it appears appropriate to point out that any kind of generalization should take into consideration how both of the aspects can be found in the same people but in different circumstances, and how each person turns out to be a unique individual.

Everyone is a unique universe because, the alchemy produced by the combination of genetic heritage and circumstances of life, such as social and working opportunities, creates a myriad of possible outcomes and different possibilities of the development of potential. It is therefore up to the preparation of the therapist, being able to capture and interpret languages and messages, even if they are silent and unconscious, but always full of meaning. This is a complex and precious personal universe that it is not possible to live aside when one wants to pursue the objective of therapeutic improvement (Spurio 2011).

Erickson (1980) pointed out that each person is a reality with unique experiences and peculiar ways of perceiving and processing reality. "The first thing to keep in mind when dealing with a person is to realize that each of them is an individual. There aren't two equal people. There aren't two people who understand the same phrase in the same way" (Erickson on Gordon, Meyers – Anderson, 1984, p. 35). Hence, according to Erickson, the strategic attitude is to try to get into the way the person represents its reality and speak his own language (Erickson on Rossi 1980).

From birth, we are arranged and used to meet each other. The early attachment experiences influence the subsequent course of life. The comparison with others, are driving lessons that can be drawn from what is experienced directly, and influence the degree of fulfillment that occurs from the satisfaction of pursuing goals and motivation. During the fundamental first few years of life, the child understands who he/she is, who should he become, and what should he desire according to the expectations of parents and teachers in looking for approval of his companions and in a constant comparison; thus he will test his skills, reorganize needs, reasons and purposes that guide his actions (Caprara 1996).

So, throughout the course of life, other people have an important role with respect to the conduct and purpose that we intend to achieve; while in some cases we have the perception that they help us to understand what we want to be, in others we have the sensation that they want to impose on us to be different from who we are.

We can not deny that others are present in our representations, and their presence today is certainly amplified by the images broadcasted by the multimedia system of communication (De Kerckhove 1995). In this way we tend to assimilate, by imitation, the purposes for which it is worth engaging, and the means that should be used to achieve them (Bandura 1997). Initially it was believed that imitation was a mere instinct, however, it is now believed that it corresponds to a fundamental property of the mind to capitalize on the experience of

others, to make generalizations and reorganizations, and hence to generate behaviors (Caprara, 1996).

In the "language of change" Watzlawick (1993), exposes clarifications in relation to the persuasive language and its effects in modern neurophysiological findings, such as: the hemispherical lateralizations and the theory of the two brains. If past experiences are projected in new or future situations, generative processes of new behaviors start, together with new ways of thinking and new motivational strategies (Gulotta 2005). Therefore, knowledge and ability to use effectively the words that let the change start, can lead to the creation of new behaviors and motivations that underlie a more complex mechanism of the simple copy, and, working as a stimulus, can help to provide an inexhaustible source of design and diversification of the behavior.

Scientists discovered the so-called mirror neurons, initially in monkeys, later in humans, and this discovery has revolutionized neuroscience. These neurons are localized in the premotor cortex, an area of the cortex that is normally used to prepare a motion before it is executed by the motor cortex. They have been defined as a kind of bridge connecting observation with action (Oliverio 2008). At the University of California at Los Angeles, experiments to test the activity of the frontal cortex have been conducted.

In order to individuate electrical activity of single neurons in frontal cortex, a group of patients received electrodes to be part of a test, and, thanks to this study, researchers identified neurons capable of performing a breaking action on the activity of mirror neurons, especially when the person tested wanted to make a motion different from that observed (Oliverio 2008). In addition to the imitative mirror neurons which allows us to achieve behaviors based on what we observe and learn, there is neural activity that would repress actions when they are in conflict with our own decisions or will.

Is the development of the nervous system from animal to human, thus, is a matter of free will? (Oliverio 2008). A system of mirror neurons, excitatory and inhibitory, makes us people less subject to a blind imitation, but individuals who are not acting on simply reproducing behaviors of others and, moreover, able to control negative and dysfunctional behaviors (Oliverio 2008). It would seem therefore appropriate that even if in a helping-oriented relationship, it is necessary and appropriate to take account of the neuropsychological and strategic dynamics linked to neural processes underlying the learning process, to account for individual and collective mechanisms of learning and empathy which can be appropriately solicited or unsolicited.

Many studies, even experimental, seem to highlight the unfathomable, and partly still the unknown and the possibilities of the human mind to learn during the entire course of life, revealing great opportunities for future development. About this, the research conducted by three psychologists and researchers at the University

of Aberdeen, Scotland, Lyn-den Miles, Louise Nind and Neil Macrae, (2010), are of great interest. The three researchers comment on their latest discovery in the *Psychological Science* journal in this way "... No time machine is still able to transport us back into the past and forward into the future; however, man is perfectly capable of piercing the veil of time with his mind, traveling forward, or back in time.... ". The reason is, as the authors explain in the publication, that there is a close correlation between the imagination of space and time and the body response at the level of the sensorimotor system.

This means that, in the case of mind time - travel through the past or the future - the body tends to "align" with the brain according to a phenomenon called by researchers "cronesthesia". In their research, 20 young people have been subjected to a sensor motor above the left knee, then they have been asked to imagine traveling in time to the past or to the future. When young people thought about the past, the sensor tended to fluctuate back of the knee, while the opposite occurred when young people were thinking of traveling into the future. "The expression of space and time produces a clear behavioral sign of a mental operation otherwise invisible" say the authors. Revisiting the past in a whole new perspective and analysis let us reinterpret the motivations and reasons that led to failure, as well as to consolidate and fully understand the reasons behind success, so, taking into consideration the results of this analysis, it is possible to confirm or reverse the new strategies of the future. Recent studies and research let us imagine how vast and fascinating the argument can be of being in treatment through the right choice of words, words that heal.

Psychotherapy has proved to be a real treatment whose interest is primarily and directly in the brain and that is able to modify it in a stable way, even in the anatomical structure and functionality. According to Kandel (1999), one of major living scientists, Nobel Prize winner for medicine, physiology, and an American neurologist and psychiatrist, psychotherapy is a real cure, a biological treatment, as it produces behavioral changes through new words, new experiences and new learning that causes documented changes: the alteration of synaptic connections, or the interconnections of neurons, determines structural changes in the brain, that operates on anatomical models of interconnection of the nerve cells. Kandel started his studies with the behavior and nervous system of *Aplysia*, a small snail, and in time has come to extend the discoveries to learning processes of humans.

The discovery was revolutionary and has opened a new way of approaching neurological studies related to psychological behaviors and in particular the learning process. The central idea is that understanding the biological processes of learning and memory opens the possibility to understand the behavior of people and their disorders and psychiatric symptoms. This insight has represented a breakthrough in neuroscience and has

led the way to interconnected studies between different fields, such as biology, psychiatry and psychotherapy.

The improvement, helped by the use of techniques, visualization and investigation of the brain, has offered a more accurate evaluation of the quantitative and qualitative influence of psychotherapy on brain functioning. The experimental research provides an understanding of human development in an extraordinary way that reminds us of the principles of Freudian psychoanalysis.

There are convincing proofs of the existence of the unconscious. It is proved that most of the complex mental life is unconscious; people experience thoughts and emotions of which they are unaware. Psychoanalysis helps to understand childhood trauma and is a powerful tool for change and growth. If we think that it is a road made mostly of words, we understand what it means that words have the power to treat. The therapeutic process allows the recovery of memory, to live a new experience through the relationship of transfer with the analyst.

Kandel (1999) argues that psychoanalysis offers a vision of the mind more coherently and satisfactorily from an intellectual point of view... there is reason to believe that the biology of the mind will be the main area of research in the twenty-first century, like the biology of the gene has been in the second half of the twentieth. Therefore, the value of the words in the healing process runs constantly with the path of therapeutic treatment, and that even psychoanalytic therapy is strategic. The net of exchanges and relations between brain chemistry and the right words to heal is subtle and intricate, but at the same time very strong. The research on the placebo effect of Benedetti (2010, 2012) has significantly contributed to explain the complexity of these interactions.

For a long time the placebo effect has been a considered in a very simplistic way, until research has begun to clarify the complexity of the emotions that bring the mind and body to meet (Ruggiero 2014). Trust in the words strategically chosen and well used by the therapist, coach or trainer, causes ripple effects benefits, with activation of the prefrontal dorsolateral cortex, a beneficial neural tune that may cease without the use of restorative words.

The psychotherapist must therefore be an excellent professional who uses the right words to heal strategically and carefully, because when this happens during psychotherapy, a very effective process of activation of brain areas can start, in addition to those stimulated by the placebo effect (The left prefrontal area); furthermore an increasing activity in inter-hemispheric (right/left) and a significant increase of the connections of the callosum corpus (Benedetti 2010) has been found. For Carderi, Petruccelli, Verrastro, (2013) respect and listening are essential to establish rapport, i.e. a trustful relationship with the unconscious mind, where the quality of the therapist penetrates interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, according to the authors, the instrument to establish rapport is

'tracing'. The tracing consists in reflecting the behavior of the patient in order to communicate: "you exist for me!" "I understand you," and then "I am able to help you." (Carderi et al. 2013).

It is with ethical attitude that the therapist assumes responsibility as a part of the reality that he belongs to. Understanding weaknesses or deficiencies is the way to see and understand those of others. The prejudices, lack of self-criticism, arrogance, and disrespect are the causes and consequences of many misunderstandings. It is increasingly necessary to move towards social, personal and organizational objectives that have higher goals than profit, and the first step in this direction is to learn to respect others through projects like a self-efficacy window and the improvement of people innovatively. To deeply respect himself and others means to live with dignity and with the responsibility for human relationships.

For this reason the value of making a psychological and ethical commitment towards the other, as individuals that are part of the society in the broadest sense of the term must be re-evaluated. The words chosen both in therapeutic contexts and in everyday life have to be re-evaluated, well aware of the great and magical potential of healing and change that words can activate. Today, neuroscience is finally able to demonstrate that words have a great power, as a drug able to activate a real emotional alchemy (Ruggiero 2012).

Research, increasingly attractive, makes evident the great capacity of the word and, therefore, of strategic training and psychotherapy, to function effectively as a contribution to the learning process and remodeling of brain synapses (Ruggiero 2012).

Since 1996 LeDoux contrasted the features of top-down psycho-therapy that allows the patient to gain new experiences that help them to grow, with the bottom-up process of medication. The complementarity of the two approaches, helps us to understand the profound connection that exists between words and care and their extraordinary healing power. According to Ruggiero and Icone (2012), we can say that when the word becomes a gesture, vibration and sound, it encourages contact with a deep part of ourselves, the word "I" becomes care, curiosity, eagerness, and an attitude of the soul. Care healing is not only alleviating or eliminating pain, but also is trying to tell and share. "All the pains and losses are bearable if you insert them into a story, if one tells a story on them" (Cavarero 2001). The passions aroused by well-chosen words are therefore the main way of achieving an interior tuning, the whole human capacity to play together all the parts of which we are made (Siegel 2007). Of course, this is not possible without the work of a "resonant" therapist that thinks, listens, takes care of the relationship with the other (Ruggiero 2014), and who, just as with refreshing music, conveys its beneficial intervention through strategically chosen words to heal.

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