

**Words Can Heal or They Can Hurt:
Preventing Emotional Abuse (Part 3)**

By Natasha M. Ali, Ph.D. C. Psych.

In Part 1 of this article, I provided the definition of emotional abuse, gave some examples, discussed where it occurs, and talked about its prevalence in some Muslim-majority countries. In Part 2, I discussed the impact of emotional abuse on the abused as well as the abuser, and the Islamic perspective on this topic. For this final part, I will review some ways to communicate when dealing with negative emotions so that emotional abuse is circumvented.

How to Speak in a Way that Heals:

The table below summarizes, and compares, the features of emotional abuse with more respectful speech. Related verses of the Qu’ran are also included. I often use this guide to identify areas of my speaking that need improvement.

Table 1. Comparing Words That Hurt With Words That Heal

Words That Hurt (Emotional Abuse)	Words That Heal (Expressive Speaking) (Guerney, 1977)
<p>Is General:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● characterizes the person ● labels others ● generalizes ● jumps to conclusions ● magnifies faults ● contains words like, “always, never” ● makes assumptions about others’ motives which you believe are absolutely correct ● Underlying tone: “I’m superior, right, OK” “You’re inferior, wrong, not OK” → blaming & judgmental <p>“Lazy, no good, idiot, dumb, stupid, loser, useless, bad, ugly”</p> <p>“Over all those endowed with knowledge is the All-Knowing” (Qu’ran, 12:76, Al-Hilali & Khan translation).</p>	<p>Is Specific:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● focuses on and sticks to the evidence & facts without interpreting them ● avoids making assumptions about others’ motives ● what behaviour did you see/observe? ● what did you hear, smell, taste, touch? ● Underlying tone: “I’m OK, you’re OK; I have strengths and so do you; I have weaknesses and so do you” <p>“I noticed that you did not wash the dishes when you promised you would.”</p> <p>“And mix not truth with falsehood” (Qu’ran, 2:42, Al-Hilali & Khan translation).</p>

<p>Uses a lot of “you” statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● speaker avoids taking responsibility for his/her values, beliefs & expectations by focusing on others <p>“You children are driving me crazy.” “You never listen to me.”</p>	<p>Uses a lot of “I” statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● speaker takes responsibility for his/her values, beliefs & expectations by focusing on self <p>“I’m getting flustered and stressed out.” “I feel ignored.”</p>
<p>Doesn’t express feelings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● speaker avoids taking responsibility for his/her feelings by focusing on others 	<p>Expresses feelings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● speaker takes responsibility for his/her feelings by expressing them <p>“I feel hurt/offended/concerned/worried/sad/frustrated”</p> <p>““Verily, the hearing, and the sight, and the heart of each of those ones will be questioned” (Qu’ran, 17:36, Al-Hilali & Khan translation).</p>
<p>No positive goal or intention is stated:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tone is negative 	<p>States positive goal or intention:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Tone is more positive ● State wants, needs, and rights <p>“I want us to work as a team.” “I’m hoping we can cooperate and figure this out.”</p>
<p>Makes demands, commands, or threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Doesn’t take “no” for an answer <p>“I’m going to send you away.” “I’m going to divorce you.”</p>	<p>Makes requests or suggestions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Accepts that the other person has the right to say “no” <p>“Could you wash the dishes now?” “It would help my stress level if you played quietly for the next 15 minutes.”</p>

Examples of Speech That Heals:

To demonstrate how Expressive Speaking skills sound, I have applied them to the examples presented in Part 1 of this article.

An employee arrives late for the 4th time this week. Her boss responds, “This is the 4th time this week that I’ve noticed you’re late. I’m feeling a bit frustrated and confused about what’s going on for you, and also worried about losing business because customers are not being served on time. I want to figure this out. Can we talk about what’s been happening for you this week?”

Two young kids are fighting with each other—for the 10th time that day. Their mother responds, “This is the 10th fight you guys have had today. Aren’t you both tired? I don’t know about you, but I am. I’m getting stressed out by your fighting. I’d love to have a house with peace and calm. How about the two of you not fight one another for the next 15 minutes?”

A student hasn’t submitted his homework, even after his teacher has given him a few chances to do so. His teacher remarks, “You haven’t submitted your homework even after I’ve given you a few chances to do so. I’m worried and concerned about you. I really want to see you graduate. So, can we talk about what’s been going on for you that’s gotten in the way of submitting your homework?”

After being taunted by another child, a girl says to her bully, “Would you stop bullying me?!¹” Then she tells herself, “I may not be the prettiest girl in the school, or the most popular, but I’m very ok. I have some good, close friends, people say I have a cute smile, and I’m really good at reading.”

A husband says to his wife, “I’m pretty frustrated and unhappy with how this house looks. There are dirty dishes piled up in the kitchen, dirty clothes strewn in the bedroom, and books all over the study. I’d really like our home to look cleaner, tidier, and more organized. Can I help you and the kids out to make the home look more presentable?”

One spouse to another, “I’ve noticed that you’ve been online for a few hours in the evenings for the past two weeks. I’ve been feeling insecure because we haven’t been spending time together, frustrated because I’ve been feeling ignored, and now I’ve become paranoid that you might be talking to someone else. I’d like us to be close again and connect. Can we spend more time together in the evenings?”

A father says to his teenage child, “I heard from someone in your school that you might be dating. I feel disappointed, hurt, angry, and confused because you know your mother and I don’t believe in dating. Adhering to Islamic values is something that your mother and I always wanted for you and your siblings. Can we talk about your values, and whether you are dating?”

A mother to her young adult child, “For the past week, you’ve probably spent a good 8 hours per day playing videogames. I’m feeling frustrated, alone, and so very tired. There’s a lot of housework to do, and I could really use your help. Could you please help me with the laundry today?”

A divorced husband says to his ex-wife, “For the last 5 conversations we’ve had, you’ve asked for money. I’m feeling a bit frustrated, at my wit’s end, and used. I really want you to be more financially

¹ If the bullying does not stop, for her safety, she needs to report it as soon as possible to a trusted authority figure, such as a parent, teacher, or other school staff.

independent and empowered. How can we make that happen? Shall I make an appointment for you to see a financial advisor? Or how about talking with your friend who's really good with budgeting?"

A driver cuts another driver off. The driver who is cut off thinks to himself, "Maybe his wife is about to give birth any minute now, and that's why he's in a rush. Hey, I've accidentally cut people off in my life too. We're both still alive. Alhamdo'lilah."

How To Prepare Ourselves to Speak in a Way That Heals:

(1) Modifying our mindsets.

The mindset to engage in Expressive Speaking requires us to be more realistic in terms of our expectations of others, our perceived ability to control them, and our desire to get our way (Burns, 1999). When we expect others to reciprocate our hard work and goodness by giving us what we want, or believe that we are completely responsible for other people's choices and behaviour, we set ourselves up for anger, sadness, and guilt. The reality, however, is that people do not always reciprocate our hard work and good efforts by giving us what we want. Nor do we have complete control over others—especially other adults—even if those other adults are our children and spouses. Furthermore, reality teaches us that we will not always get our way. A more realistic mindset is to *negotiate* for what we want, rather than view disappointments as "tragedies" (Burns, 1999, p. 288), to accept that we will not always get our way, and to embrace the idea that we have *influence*, but not perfect control, over others. Acknowledging that others have the right to their own feelings and opinions which might differ from our own might also help.

Our religion preaches this realistic mindset. Our Prophet (s.a.w.) faced many heart-breaking disappointments and trials in his life—despite his devotion to Allah (s.w.t.) and top-notch deen (faith) and ahqlaq (manners). For example, he was emotionally and physically abused by the leaders and residents of Taif after giving dawah to them (El Mekki, 2017). Some people of Taif pelted stones and rocks at his feet for almost 1 hour as he walked back to Mecca—to the point where his feet bled so much that they stuck to his sandals upon his arrival to Mecca (personal communication, K. El Mekki,

October 2017). Another example was that his beloved uncle Abu Talib never took shahadah despite receiving significant dawah from the Prophet (s.a.w.). Allah (s.w.t.) reminded the Prophet (s.a.w.), “And grieve not over them, nor be straitened (in distress) because of what they plot” (Qu’ran, 27:70, Al-Hilali & Khan translation).

The following verses are a good summary: “This (the Qu’ran) is a plain statement for mankind, a guidance and instruction to those who are Al-Muttaqun (the pious). So do not become weak, nor be sad, and you will be superior if you are indeed believers. If a wound has touched you, be assured a similar wound has touched the others. And so are the days (good and not so good), that We give to men by turns, that Allah may test those who believe, and that He may take martyrs from among you. And Allah likes not the Zalimun (wrong-doers). And that Allah may test the believers and destroy the disbelievers. Do you think that you will enter Paradise before Allah tests those of you who fought (in His Cause) and tests those who are As-Sabirun (the patient)? (Qu’ran, 3:138-142, Al-Hilali & Khan translation).” In other words, Allah (s.w.t.) has the Ultimate Control over others, not us. Ultimate Justice therefore rests with Him. We will all be tested—believers and wrong-doers alike. But those who are patient and persistent will eventually be rewarded.

(2) Time-outs.

Another strategy to practice Expressive Speaking is to take a **time-out** when conversations become so heated that we are at risk of speaking hurtfully. Time-outs are not meant to be used as a strategy to punish people by abandoning them, or a time to avoid dealing with an issue through escaping (La Casa, Inc., 2006). Going on one’s cell phone, playing a videogame, or smoking during time-outs are considered ways of escaping, rather than, dealing with the issue. Rather, time-outs are meant to be opportunities for people to take a finite break to collect their thoughts, come up with more realistic expectations, figure out ways to speak that will heal, and consider some negotiation strategies. It is also a time when people can manage their negative emotions by engaging in either calming,

spiritually nourishing activities, like making wudu, praying, or going for a walk, or in rigorous physical activities, like running. An example of how to request a time-out is, “I’m beginning to feel like things are getting out of control. And I don’t want to say something that I later regret. So, I need to take a time-out. I’m going for a walk around the block and I’ll be back in 15 minutes. Let’s try talking about this when I return.”

Learning to speak in a way that heals is no easy task if, for years, we have learned to speak, and have spoken, in a way that hurts. Taking communication skills training at work or school, or parenting classes, or consulting with a mental health professional, like a counsellor, psychologist, social worker, or occupational therapist can help change less adaptive, ingrained behaviours to more adaptive ones.

If we can learn to speak in a way that heals not only others, but also ourselves, we will be on the path to healing ourselves and our relationships. And perhaps this act can help keep us, or lead us, onto the Straight Path (siratul mustaqeem)--the path of those on whom Allah (s.w.t.) has bestowed His Grace (from Surah Al-Fatiha, v. 6-7, which many of us recite multiple times daily).

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