

# MAKING HOSTILE WORDS HARMLESS

**A GUIDE TO THE POWER OF POSITIVE  
SPEAKING FOR HELPING  
PROFESSIONALS AND THEIR CLIENTS**

**KATE COHEN-POSEY**



**WILEY**

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.



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A target mandala (used on the cover) often suggests hostility projected onto others and a world beset with danger. Yet the infusion of yellows, golds, and oranges conveys the spirit and self-worth that renders these forces harmless.

To my darling daughter Lela who,  
from an early age, authored some of the best lines  
in this book and continues to be an inspiration





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# Case Stories

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The names of clients whose stories appear in this book have been changed, and all have given written permission to use transcripts of their sessions. To further provide anonymity, details of lives have been altered, story lines adapted, and in some cases, literary gender changes performed.



# Introduction

Norman Vincent Peale wrote *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952. It stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 186 consecutive weeks and sold over 20 million copies. Yet, it was criticized by theologians, mental health experts, scholars, and even politicians like Adlai Stevenson. Peale promoted methods to help people “manifest” their desires and dreams through faith and autosuggestion. His detractors believed his book was poorly researched and gave people false hope.

Currently, there has been a resurgence in the positive-thinking movement. In 1986, Jerry and Esther Hicks began teaching The Science of Deliberate Creation™. Their teachings offer the perspective of a group of (nonphysical) spiritual beings called Abraham: You make your own reality, and the universe reflects it back to you. Many works have followed. Two books—*The Law of Attraction* (Hicks & Hicks, 2006) and *The Secret* (Byrne, 2006)—are the current rage offering promises of energy, prosperity, health, wealth, and happiness. These writers substantiate their theories with quantum physics.

The power of positive *speaking* taught in *Making Hostile Words Harmless* makes none of these pledges. It is designed to deal with negative verbiage. When used, harmony and balance are created through interacting with people. The effect is immediate. At the very least, offenders are slightly agitated, but neutralized, and walk away befuddled. However, there are times when positive speaking can turn verbal cruelty into kindness and even change the behavior patterns of coldhearted, callous people. Regardless of the impact on people trying to bully and batter, simple changes in language are

empowering without resorting to cruel tactics, which only add to the vicious cycle of nastiness.

The basic rule of positive speaking is to respond to verbal aggression without using instinctual patterns of attacking, defending, or withdrawing. I discovered the technique as a youngster but did not fully develop it until I became a counselor and a group leader for teens.

My first book, *How to Handle Bullies, Teasers, and Other Meanies* (1995) is a parent-child resource that began to codify a myriad of responses (compliments, questions, agreements, paraphrases, and so on) that do not break the positive speaking rule. This new book spells out the fine nuances of positive speaking through more than 80 examples that address some of the challenges of adult life.

Best-seller lists show that people not only want to control the destiny of their fortunes and fantasies, but that they are also seeking practical ways to handle the difficult people who suck the joy out of daily life with displeasing banter. *The No Asshole Rule* (2007) by Robert I. Sutton uses picturesque language to demonstrate how some people poison the workplace and are detrimental to business. He offers tips for surviving toxic job environments and discusses corporate hiring and firing strategies.

*Making Hostile Words Harmless* proposes that the bully on the playground will grow up to not only become the tormenter of people in the workplace but also to be the aggravating neighbor, in-law, spouse, or even fellow worshipper.

## ORIGINS OF THE POWER OF POSITIVE SPEAKING

Rather than focusing on why verbal abuse has reached epidemic proportions, this text explores ancient philosophies and recent psychologies that offer antidotes to venomous verbiage. The four linguistic powers of confirming, inquiring, understanding, and



evoking are explained with enticing examples and underlying theory. Positive speaking is more than a book of talking techniques; it draws on three major sources—Taoism, the philosophy of dialogue, and hypnosis and humor.

## TAOISM

Taoism is the underlying philosophy of positive speaking. It is represented by the *yin yang* symbol that shows opposing forces constantly shifting to bring about equilibrium, which is similar to the way this book uses words to create harmony and balance. Taoism emerged in China along with other belief systems.

One ancient Chinese picture that represents different approaches to life is the metaphor of the vinegar tasters (Hoff, 1982). Three well-known men stand around a vat of vinegar; each has just removed a finger from his mouth after sampling the contents. In this picture:

1. **Confucius** has a sour expression. Vinegar, like the world, needs to be set right with proper rules and past recipes.
2. **Buddha** appears to have tasted something bitter. He believed that life is filled with illusions, attachments, and desires that lead to suffering. The way to enlightenment is to let go of attachment and see through illusion.
3. **Lao-tse** (the author of *The Tao Te Ching*) is smiling. Life can be sweet when it is understood and used for what it is. The world is not an illusion but a teacher and it is governed by the laws of nature not men.

Taoism is about survival rather than enlightenment, so it is not surprising that a Taoist priest is alleged to be the originator of the martial arts. Sometime between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries this cleric began to study how leverage, good posture, and balance could be used to redirect or undo an attack without using

weapons. It is more likely that a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and Zen made their way to Japan and, along with Shinto, they inspired *Aikidō*. It, absorbs an opponent's force rather than using throws, kicks, or strikes and remains true to the ancient wisdom of "the way of harmony."

This text puts two important Taoist principles into words: the mirror mind and *wu wei* (effortless effort). In modern times, the how-to of the mirror mind has been taught by psychologists under such terms as "active listening," "mirroring," "rephrasing," "empathizing," "validating," and "narrating," which will all be explained. However, only Taoism seems to understand the essence of the mirror mind that reflects but does not absorb.

#### PHILOSOPHY OF DIALOGUE

Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue described in *I and Thou* (1928/1970) comes the closest to explaining why verbal bullying is so rampant. Buber believed that out of a need for survival, people must use and manage their environment by interrogating, convincing, and judging others. He calls this the "I-it" stand in which people become objects for personal gain. However, humans can also spontaneously open themselves to their fellow beings without any agenda. In these "I-Thou" moments of *meeting*, a dialogue emerges that conveys more than words. Two people validate each other as they are, while acknowledging and challenging their differences. Through asking questions, showing understanding, and evoking potentials, both parties become more fully human (Kramer, 2003).

The positive speaking skills of confirming (*acting as if*), inquiry (*asking questions*), understanding (*active listening*), and evoking (*hypnosis and humor*) are exactly modeled on Buber's assessment of an I-Thou moment. All four steps of positive speaking can be

expressed using the acronym AAAH. Although I-Thou moments cannot be taught or arranged, having a repertoire of skills certainly makes them more likely to happen. When released from the bondage of attack-defend-withdraw reactions to verbal attacks, spontaneous comments emerge that enlighten and enliven the moment.

Buber recognized an “inborn Thou” that longs for real relationships in spite of the efforts of people-pleasing, judgmental, and controlling thoughts that attempt to hijack the moment with their agendas. His philosophy is imbued with spiritual undertones. An “Eternal Thou” (God Force) is always present, pulling people toward genuine meeting. When true being can sally forth and make contact with friend and foe alike; then compassion, self-respect, and even a spark of the divine emerge.

#### HYPNOSIS AND HUMOR

Whether people like it or not, they are constantly using hypnosis in everyday language. “Don’t ever lie to me again!” is a demand that creates resistance and can trigger the opposite result. Part of the mind drops out the negative “Don’t” and only hears “lie to me again.” *Voilà*—the person has just been hypnotized into a more consistent pattern of dishonesty.

Less tension and a more desirable outcome could be achieved with the words, “Even when you’re afraid of my reaction, you can always *tell me the truth.*” This is a statement of fact that is hard to deny. Such *truisms* are said to be easily accepted by the mind in hypnotic literature. The words, “tell me the truth,” sneak a hint into the body of the sentence. Embedded suggestions are the core of hypnosis and are far more palatable than demands and commands.

People mistakenly think that hypnosis is only used to put people in trances to gain control over their minds and make them perform funny parlor tricks. In truth, trance inductions make use of

sophisticated language that can also be employed to open people to change and possibilities. Of course, it could be misused to reinforce undesirable habits like lying.

Humor makes use of the unexpected and irreverent to throw people off track from where they have become stuck. The positive speaking examples in this book are rife with hypnotic, humorous language, but Chapter 5 on *Hypnosis and Humor—The Art of Evoking* spells out the particulars of specialized syntax and grammar with utter clarity.

#### *To Be or Not to Be Assertive*

Questions may be dangling in the minds of some: Why hypnosis? Isn't this just clever manipulation? Wouldn't a direct approach be better? Assertive versions of the previous example might be, "I feel used when you lie" or "Would you please be honest with me?" When it works to be forthright, this is the best course of action. But with the orneriest of people, even a simple request can incite rebellion. A simple statement of feelings ("I feel . . . when you . . .") may sound like a guilt trip. People who fear their loved one's disappointment or ire may need a hypnotic hint to make it over the honesty hump after years of minimizing, making intentional omissions, or being diplomatic.

Typical communication courses teach people to be assertive and to *actively* listen. However, there is little discussion about which skill to employ first. The positive speaking in *Making Hostile Words Harmless* argues that people cannot effectively state their position until they thoroughly grasp opposing ideas and feelings. Therefore, the arts of inquiry and understanding are prerequisites to knowing if there is an actual conflict worthy of exposing. In the process of rephrasing others ideas and validating their emotions, differences often evaporate or the other party becomes intrigued about the listener's patiently held stance. Then, the feelings and desires of

an assertive message can be fine-tuned for a well-understood antagonist. However, little attention will be given to taking a stand because acting as if, asking questions, active listening, and hypnosis and humor (AAAH) are utterly empowering.

The AAAH acronym for positive speaking is intended to suggest a sigh of relief. The examples in these pages may seem like dazzling feats of linguistic twists and turns, but they all come from the author's or her clients' own experiences. They are the *wu wei* (effortless effort) of the Taoist that bring balance and harmony into the heart of harsh verbal landscapes.

*Note:* The author first cataloged this manner of responding in a children's book titled, *How to Handle Bullies, Teasers, and Other Meanies* (Cohen-Posey, 1995), which is filled with responses that young people can use to neutralize venomous verbiage. A handout of defusing responses, "The Dance of Deflection," is published in *Brief Therapy Client Handouts* (Cohen-Posey, 2000). All responses in this book were fueled by the taunts experienced by clients, friends, and the author herself and inspired by the accounts of empowerment when the author's methods were used.