



# Co-worker's speech habit

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Dear Dianne,

work with a young lady who has about a 50-word vocabulary, and 49 of the words are “like.” I literally counted 49 “likes” in a story she was telling the other day. Her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday is coming up in three weeks, and I have been mulling over something to say to her about her annoying speech habit. Here’s what I have been considering:

Me: So, you’re, like 21 years old now. Twenty-one is, like, the cutoff age, you know.

Coworker: Cutoff age for, like, what?

Me: For using the word “like” after every few, like, words in, like, all your, like, sentences.

Does this sound mean? I asked my 22-year-old niece about it, and she said, “One of my friends said that to me in high school, and it only took that one person to make me stop doing it. You should tell her.”

I thought of another approach that might be a little kinder:

Me: So, do you feel like a real adult now?

Coworker: Oh, yeah!

Me: I’ve noticed that you still talk like a teenager sometimes.

Coworker: Well, like, whaddaya mean?

Me: You use the word “like” a lot, sometimes two or three times in one sentence. Since you’re 21 now, you should start thinking about the image

you project to people.

So, what’s your opinion? Should I say something or not?

**Annoyed and Anonymous**

Dear Annoyed,

I don’t know where the inadvertent misuse of the word “like” came from, but this faddish speech habit has swept the country! It seems everywhere I go, I hear “She was, like, this ...”, “I was, like, blown away ...” “It was, like, craaaazy ...” I hear it in airports, malls, gas stations, Wal-Mart, the hospital, and movie theaters. In most cases, the offenders are young females (although males are not immune). My husband and I were in an upscale restaurant, and the woman at the next table was excitedly speaking about something that happened to her at work. As I carefully eavesdropped, I counted 25 “likes” in the space of less than five minutes. I almost asked the waiter to move us to another table.

It seems the word “like” is being used as a filler word. It has taken the place of “uh” and in some cases “you know,” except when you are hit with the two-fisted punch “Like, you know, I was really, like, scared!”

Some people use “Ya-know-what-I-mean” at the end of most of their sentences. My husband spent a weekend with a deer hunting buddy who has this annoying speech habit. Dave came home and showered me with a “ya know what I mean ...” I felt my pulse rise and

my teeth clench as I looked him straight in the eye and said, “Yes, *I know what you mean!* It’s funny how you can spend a weekend with someone and take on his annoying speech habits so easily.”

And what about people who confuse “imply” and “infer” or use the nonword “irregardless”? Another aggravation is the pretentious use of the word “utilize” when “use” will work just as well. Or the misuse of the word “good” when responding to the question, “How are you?” by saying, “I’m good.” By answering this way, the person is saying he or she is beneficial, kind, favorable, or perhaps virtuous. The correct response is, “I’m well, thank you.” My son started placing the phrase “and stuff” at the end of his sentences: “I went to the mall and stuff.” My reply was, “Did you say you stuffed something, or did you buy some stuff? I hope you weren’t shoplifting ...” It is an annoying speech habit, and he still does it sometimes!

Please forgive my digression, but you pressed one of my hot buttons. Speech habits are like addictions — they can be very hard to break. Just ask anyone who has broken the habit of saying “like” every third word, and he or she will admit the difficulty. One young lady said the only way she could break the habit was when her mother started charging her \$1 every time she misused the word “like.” She used up all her allowance and wound up owing her mother money.

The major problem as I see it is

this young staff member's poor speech habits reflect negatively on the professionalism of the practice. The young coworker is unaware of how her speech causes others to think she is unintelligent. She probably thinks it is "hip" and "preppy" to speak as she does.

Actually, the doctor or office administrator would be the logical person to address this issue. However, knowing the nonconfrontational nature of many doctors, it is understandable that the coworker's speech habit has been allowed to persist. If you look at your situation as helping this young, impressionable girl, there's nothing mean-spirited about it. You would be exercising kindness by calling attention to something that casts her in a negative light, but you have to approach it in a way that does not embarrass her in front of anyone else.

"Can I tell you something because I like you a lot and want to help you? You are a sweet, thoughtful person, and a great assistant (whatever you can say positive about her), but there's a problem maybe you are not aware of ..." Both of the examples you suggested are fine, as long as the coworker knows you are trying to help her.

If you refrain from saying anything, the problem will persist until a patient makes a negative comment. Worse still, patients do form negative perceptions about the practice, often without saying anything. Her speech habit is annoying. We, as professionals, should refrain from doing anything that is annoying to our patients.

Akin to this discussion is my recent decision to say something about an irritating, rude situation. My nail tech-

nician is from Vietnam, and he is most excellent. Yesterday I did a slow burn as he carried on a conversation with a coworker in a foreign language the *whole* time I was in his chair. When he finished, I paid him without tipping. Instead, I motioned for him to step outside the door with me. I said, "Kenny, you do really nice work. Do you like my business?" He looked shocked and surprised but replied that he liked my business. I continued, "Well, today I felt I was treated rudely and disrespectfully by you in being excluded from the ongoing conversation you were having *in a foreign language* with your coworker while I was in your chair. If you want my business, please do not ever do that again." He was very apologetic and assured me it would not happen again. I was not trying to be mean-spirited to Kenny; I was trying to help him. I want to give him my business, but I refuse to do business with rude people. How would he know if I did not garner the courage to tell him?

Tell your coworker gently as a friend. One day when she has matured, she will appreciate your honesty and kindness.

Best wishes, Dianne ●●●