**What is in a Word…**

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is an old schoolyard chant that we have all said at some point in our lives. However, we now know that this is not true. The words we use can have a profound impact on both ourselves and others.

But what does that have to do with our bodies, physiotherapy, or our ability to function? The way we talk, or even think, about ourselves and our bodies impacts our pain, our function and our brains. Things we tell ourselves, or the words our health care providers may use with us, can worsen our pain, build fear and decrease our function. Imagine the difference between these two sentences and how they make you feel:

“You have degenerative changes in your knees; the joint has narrowed and you are bone-on-bone”

“Your knee has normal wear and tear that occurs with age, just like grey hair and wrinkles on your skin”

The first statement would likely create fear of movement, and images in your mind of your joint wearing down. With this picture in your mind, you might start to avoid activity and become fearful of new injuries. We now know that degenerative changes found on x-ray or MRI findings are often normal, age related changes, and have not been strongly correlated with pain. Your pain is real when you have degenerative changes, but fear, avoidance, your diet, or weakness in your quadriceps may be what is causing the joint to be inflamed. The degeneration is like wrinkles on your skin. Common and normal.

Describing these changes negatively, both as patients, or health care professionals, can increase fear and increase this pain.

Choosing words with less scary associations help to normalize what is going on in your body, reduce fear and create more hope for recovery.

Consider using these alternatives to scarier words when thinking about your heath (As health care providers, we need to get better at this as well):

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| --- | --- |
| Degenerative changes | Normal age-related changes  |
| Negative test results | Everything is normal  |
| Don’t worry  | Everything will be ok  |
| Instability  | Needs more strengthening |
| Bone-on-Bone | Narrowing of the joint |
| Tear  | Pull |
| Damage  | Injury |
| Paresthesia  | Altered sensations |
| Trapped nerve | Tight, but can be stretched |
| Disease  | Condition |
| Bulge/herniation | Bump/swelling |
| Chronic  | It may persist, but you can overcome it  |
| You have to live with it  | You may need to make some adjustments but you can live a full life  |

***Changing our thoughts and perceptions about our bodies can change our pain!***

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