# Where our favourite swear words came from, and why they're so much fun to say (obviously NSFW)

Belle Beth Cooper on the 26th of October 2015

**Just a heads up**: there are **lots** of swear words in this article. I'm not using dashes or asterisks or anything to censor the words. This is a grown-up piece talking about words we all know and use, so I'm being a grown-up and saying them. If swear words offend you, abort now.

> I haven't met anybody who's truly shocked at swearing, really. They're only shocked on behalf of other people.

> Or they say it's not necessary. As if that should stop one doing it. It's not necessary to have coloured socks. It's not necessary for this cushion to be here. But is anyone going to write in and say, "I was shocked to see that cushion there. It really wasn't necessary"? No. Things not being necessary is what makes life interesting. — Stephen Fry



I'm not big on swearing, personally. I feel embarrassed when I say "shit", and try to keep the conversation moving, hoping nobody will notice. I want to be able to calmly drop a fuck or dick into conversation like most Australians can, but it just doesn't come naturally to me.

I remember as a teenager when I decided I was ready to start swearing. I'd been tossing around softer words like "crap" (that one'll barely raise an eyebrow with most people) but when I was fourteen I decided it was time to get used to saying "shit".

I have a vivid memory of sitting on my mum's bed after coming home from work—a part-time job in fast food with plenty of other teenagers around to influence my vocabulary. I don't know what we

were talking about, but I remember throwing "shit" into a sentence and carefully assessing her reaction.

She didn't bat an eye.

This could be for two reasons: one, she was a fairly lax parent at the time. Two, she also swore a lot herself. Her catchphrase was "fuck a duck".

It wasn't long after that particular day that I went to Oklahoma as an exchange student for a year. Spending twelve months in the Bible Belt of the U.S.A. left me purged of any desire to say "shit"—I even stopped saying "sucks" (as in, "that sucks") and "damn", after getting in trouble for use each of those "cuss" words.

When I came back to Australia having just turned sixteen I was alienated from my former friends. I no longer spent time with people who drank every weekend and used swear words in every conceivable part of a sentence. So I guess you could say I never had an initiation into swearing.

These days I'm not opposed to swearing, but I've never managed to feel comfortable doing it myself.

I've also never really understood the nuances of swearing. From place to place which words are considered "swear words" differs— and these can even change over time. But where do these words come from, and what makes them offensive?

Why is it that singing along with a country song that included the word "damn" led to a friend from Oklahoma admonishing me, yet my mother didn't bat an eye when I said "shit" in conversation with her a year earlier? And why do French children have their own special swear word but English children don't?

# What is it, in essence, that makes swear words so special?

In a well-known stand-up comedy routine[3], George Carlin explains why there are seven words you can't say on TV. Carlin points out that this is simply a list of words "that we've decided...not to use all the time."

Carlin's words are as follows:

- shit
- piss
- cunt
- fuck
- cocksucker
- motherfucker
- tits

Carlin also points out that we have more ways to describe these words (dirty, obscene, profane, rude, bad, blue, and so on) than we have "unsayable" words themselves.

So what is it about swearing that makes that particular group of words so shocking? Why are some words okay in some contexts, but not in others? And some words aren't okay ever?

According to cognitive scientist and linguist Steven Pinker, it's the fact that swear words affect us emotionally[1]. Swear words have a particular power that other words don't.

In Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing, author Melissa Mohr says swear words "induce greater skin conductance responses than do other words, even emotionally evocative words such as death or cancer"[2].

Swear words can affect us strongly whether we're reading them, listening to them, or saying them ourselves. Swearing can be cathartic, which can help us cope with "intolerable periods of inner conflict, repression and readjustment"[5].

Swearing can also help us deal with physical pain, believe it or not. One study[6] tested how long participants could hold their hand in a bucket of icy water. In the first round, participants were allowed to say a neutral word. In the second round, they repeated a swear word instead. The study found that swearing helped:

> Swearing increased pain tolerance, increased heart rate and decreased perceived pain compared with not swearing. However, swearing did not increase pain tolerance in males with a tendency to catastrophise.

MythBusters replicated the experiment (you can see a video of it here), and found a 30% increase in pain tolerance (time spent with the hand in ice water) when the participants were allowed to swear.

Although the original study mentioned that men who exaggerate the pain don't get the extra boost from swearing, I wanted to know how someone who doesn't normally swear would fare. Would the swear word be extra useful for pain tolerance, or less so?

I gave the experiment a go myself, using "cheese" as my neutral word. I didn't quite get the water as cool as it needed to be, but after 9 minutes with my hand in cold water using a neutral word, I

abandoned the whole experiment. Mythbusters stopped at 3 minutes for safety reasons, so 9 minutes seemed plenty long enough to prove that I didn't need to swear to handle the pain. (The experiment is also surprisingly boring, so I couldn't convince myself to do it again with colder water.)

Swearing affects us so strongly that we can't help reacting.
According to Steven Pinker, we can't help but register the meaning
of swear words (and other taboo words)—they're processed
involuntarily. This is illustrated well in a common psychology
experiment called the Stroop test. You've probably seen it before—
it's presented as a list of colour names that are printed in different
colours to the ones they say.



The test asks you to say the colour the word is printed in, not the
one it actually says. So from the example above, the correct answers
for the top line, left-to-right, would be **red, blue, green**.

When the colour names and their ink colours are different (as in the
image above), we're much slower at naming the colour of each
word than if they matched. This is because our brain naturally reads
the word, and we want to say it. We have to stop ourselves and take
the time to look at the ink colour instead.

When swear words are used instead of colour names, it slows us
down as well. In fact, taboo words used in a Stroop test have been
shown to slow us down more than just using neutral words[8]—that

involuntary processing of the taboo meaning of a swear word really trips us up.

And because all this processing is involuntary, it gives someone saying a swear word a lot of power over whoever's listening.

This emotional effect is more than skin deep. According to Pinker, we use a different area of our brains to store and process swear words than we do for other language. This explains why sometimes patients who lose their language abilities can still use swear words.

In fact, we tend to use areas of our brain associated with negative emotions when we say or hear swear words. Producing swear words is related to the basal ganglia region of the brain, which is also responsible for our inhibition. And when we perceive a swear word produced by someone else, our amygdala runs the show, which is the brain area that responds to threats.

There's also something particular about the words we consider "swear words" and why they're so much more than ordinary words: they're almost all "connotation"—that is, the emotional baggage that comes with a word. Very little of a swear word's power comes from its literal definition, unlike the rest of our words which derive almost all power from their literal meanings. When "fuck" was introduced in English, for instance, it referred to the sexual act and nothing else. It was indecent, but it wasn't considered a swear word[9]. It had very little connotation at this time, apart from being something you wouldn't use in polite conversation. It wasn't until it was used in forms like "fuck you" and "don't fuck with me", where the purpose was to shock and offend through the extra emotional baggage imbued in "fuck", that it became a swear word.

What constitutes a swear word changes over time. Just as the rest of our language changes based on the way we use it every day, swear words come and go, and they gain or lose intensity. As Ruth Wajnryb says in Expletive Deleted, "As one word goes, another replaces it. The taboo shifts a little, but the magic is enduring"[10].

Although swearing as a verb (i.e. "stop swearing so much") usually refers to "foul language", swearing comes in another form: the kind you'd see in a court or parliament. To swear an oath is generally taken quite seriously in these cases, and used to be taken seriously in everyday life.

Conversely, swearing a false, or "vain", oath was incredibly bad in the Middle Ages. The most emotional, obscene language you could use during this period was to take the Lord's name in vain. "Bad" oath swearing was thought to hurt God's reputation, or even physically harm him. False swearing was so bad, it was almost equivalent to murder.

Steven Pinker says each type of swearing taps into a different human emotion. After all, the reason swearing is so shocking is that it arouses our emotions. In the case of oaths, that emotion is twofold: awe and fear.

The fact that people tend to feel less awe and fear around religious figures or ideas these days explains why these words have lost some of the impact they once had. After the rise of Protestantism, people started thinking differently about their relationship with God, and swear words relating to body parts and bodily functions became more offensive.

This change has proven to be an issue for artists. A perfect example is Deadwood, an HBO series set in South Dakota in the 1870's. While

the show's creator David Milch wanted to create a truthful representation of this time period, the language of the time proved to be an issue. The characters in Deadwood, many of whom are real historical figures, were known to swear like sailors—only what was incredibly shocking and offensive at the time would sound laughable—or at the very least, completely innocuous—to us today.

In particular, religion held enough sway over people for religious words like "damn" and "hell" to be the most offensive. Milch opted to swap out these words for modern equivalents (in terms of offensiveness) like "cocksucker". Although the verisimilitude of the language is lost, the impact for the viewer is maintained.
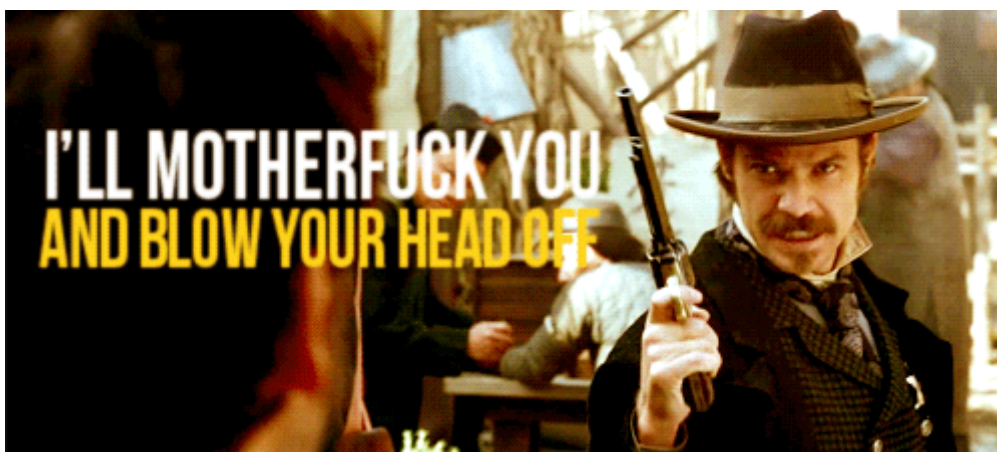


When it comes to modern swear words, we tend to deal with obscenities most often. There are two main types of obscene swear words: those that deal with sexuality (e.g. "fucking" as a verb, "cock"), and those that deal with bodily functions and effluvia (e.g. "shit", "piss").

According to Steven Pinker, body-related obscenities tap into the emotion of disgust. Sexual-related obscenities tap into revulsion at depravity.

Pinker makes a good point regarding sexuality—of course there are lots of good things about sex, and one might wonder why we

necessarily feel revulsion when confronted with obscenities relating to sexuality. Pinker says this is due to the huge number of uncomfortable areas within sexuality such as rape, harassment, incest, jealousy, and infidelity.

He also points out that we often use sexual-related swear words to insult others by insinuating they consistently engage in a practice which others may find depraved. For instance:

- incest: "motherfucker"

- fellatio: "cocksucker"

- sodomy: "bugger"

- masturbation: "jerk" or "wanker"

While it's debated whether fuck is our most shocking swear word (racial slurs have started taking over as the most shocking category of offensive language), it's easily our most flexible. As this educational video explains, "fuck" can be used as almost any part of speech in an English sentence:
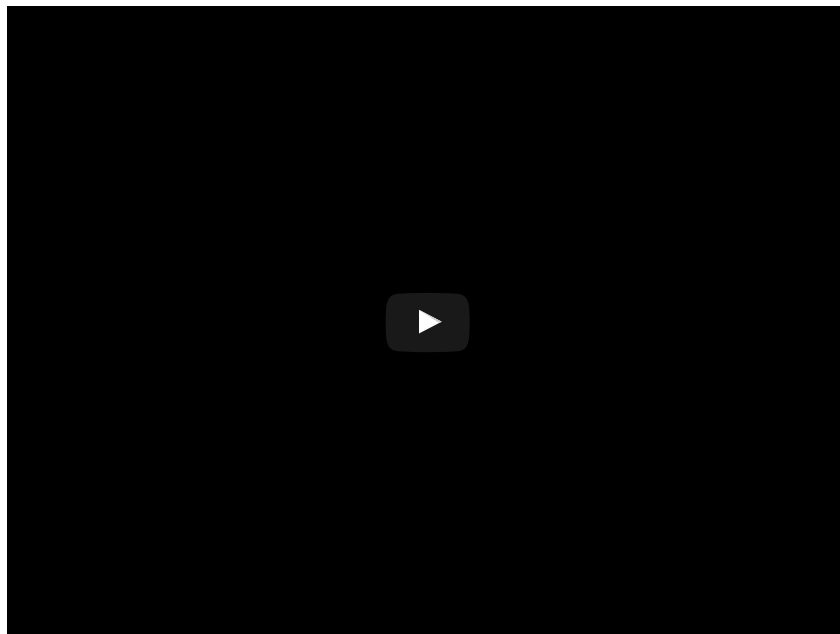


An episode of The Wire also showed the flexibility of the word, by using nothing but variations of "fuck" for an entire scene.

So where did these modern swear words come from, before they overtook the more religious swearing people people were used to?

According to Jesse Sheidlower, author of The F-Word, the word "fuck" is related to words in other Germanic languages, including Dutch, German, and Swedish, though no one knows for sure which language it came from[13]. Its relatives in other languages have similar sexual meanings, or meanings such as "to strike" or "to move back and forth".

Some of the earliest instances of fuck, like many other words, appear in the names of people and places. In 1290 the name Simon Fuckebotere was recorded. In 1286/7, Henry Fuckebeggar was noted. Each of these relates to the earlier meaning "to strike" or "to hit". It was common in England around this time to use trades, identifying features, and personality traits as fodder for names[14]. So, Simon Fuckebotere was likely known for hitting butter, while Henry Fuckebeggar may have spent his time hitting the poor.

The earliest known appearance of "fuck" as we know it today is around 1475, when it was written in a cipher. This could indicate that it was in use much earlier, but was such a bad word that it couldn't be written down. In Middle English, the equivalent of "fuck" was "swive". Swive was a vulgar word used for sexual intercourse, which may have been replaced by fuck, when that became more popular.
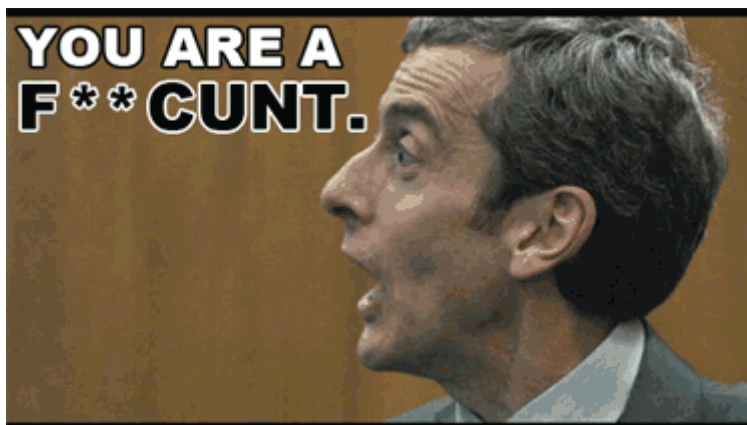
As with "fuck", we first find a reference to the word "cunt" in English as part of a name—several names, in fact. A street in London is listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, dated 1230, as Gropecuntelane. This street name was so common, in fact, that there was one in Oxford as well.

Far from being derogatory, however, this street name was simply descriptive. Each Gropecuntelane was a red light district, but the fact that it was a public street name implies there was no shame in the word during this period.

It wasn't uncommon for people to have "cunt" in their names, either —as proven by recorded references to such names as Godwin Clawcuncte, Robert Clevecunt, and (I love this one) Bele Wydecunthe.

In Expletive Deleted, Ruth Wajnryb points out that prior to the Middle Ages, "parts of the body and bodily functions were accepted as commonplace and referred to quite freely". During this period, religious oaths were the "bad language" of the day. Wajnryb quotes an example from medical writing in the early fifteenth century to support this idea: "In women the neck of the bladder is short and is made fast to the cunte".

So cunt always referred to female genitals, but it simply wasn't used the way it is today, in phrases such as "don't be a cunt". As Kate Wiles points out at New Republic, cunt is perhaps "more feminist" than "vagina", which relies on the penis for its definition[15]. Vagina comes from Latin with the meaning "sheath" or "scabbard". Even worse: it was originally "a crude metaphor for the anus".

In time, "cunt" took on more of an obscene role in language and lost its public acceptance. Geoffrey Hughes, a professor of the History of the English Language, believes the use of a variant of cunt, "queynte" in Chaucer's The Miller's Tale and The Wife of Bath shows that this process had already begun when these books were first published.

Shakespeare was also careful not to use the word "cunt" directly, though he alluded to it with various puns—for instance, the phrase "country matters" in Hamlet, Act III, scene ii, which is followed by a crack about what "lie between maids' legs".



A common swear word that doesn't have much of a shock factor today is "bloody". In fact, it's so common in Australia that it's sometimes called "the great Australian adjective".

Bloody may have come from either the obvious "covered in blood" adjective, or the late-seventeenth-century term "bloods" to mean "aristocratic rabble-rousers". In the second case, bloody would mean to be like "a blood"—"bloody drunk", for instance, meaning "as drunk as a blood".

Around the time these "bloods" were getting drunk, bloody wasn't considered very offensive. It was included in plays seen by respectable audiences, and in printed versions of those plays with no problem. Around the start of the nineteenth century bloody began to be printed with dashes, like "b--" or "b--y". At this point the word had become more offensive and was declining in use among polite society.

By the time George Bernard Shaw included "bloody" in his play Pygmalion in 1914, audiences were shocked at first, before laughing hysterically for "at least a minute and a quarter". By this time bloody was still considered a "bad" word, but no longer caused as much offence as it did in earlier centuries.

Even by the 1860s, swearing probably sounded quite similar to how we speak today. Religious words would still have been employed frequently but were already having less of an effect. In the mid- to late-19th century, "fuck" was already being used in lots of the forms we employ today, such as "go fuck yourself", "I don't give a fuck", and "he fucked me over".

More recently the "most shocking" title has been moving from obscene words for body parts and sexual acts to racial slurs. According to Jesse Sheidlower in The F-Word, "one prominent professor told U.S. News & World Report in 1994 that if she used fuck in class, no one would bat an eye, but that she would never dare to use any racial epithet in any context".

When we compare words from time periods that are far apart we see more clearly the changes that have occurred. For instance, in the Middle Ages, "cunt" was not obscene, and neither was "bollocks". Yet in 2000 a ranking of the top ten swear words in Britain ranked "bollocks" at number eight.

As words change in offensiveness over time, they also tend to be applied differently. "Bugger", for instance, used as an obscene term for anal sex, was used against men and women equally in the 19th century. Today "bugger" is almost exclusively applied to men.



This is actually contrary to the general trend. Usually swear words move from being applied to a single gender to being applied to everyone equally, over time. "Bitch" and "cunt", for instance, can be applied to both men and women. "Shit" is also applied to both genders, though it was originally a "term of contempt, applied to men only".

Psychology professor Timothy Jay says pretty much everyone swears[16]. On average, around 0.3% to 0.7% of our speech is made up of swear words (compare that to personal pronouns like "I" and "you", which make up around 1% of our speech). People who are more extraverted are more likely to swear, but Jay says we all do it to some degree, and we start young—around the age of two[17].

More than a fascinating topic worth curious exploration, swearing is a big part of how we communicate on a daily basis. Swear words affect us more strongly than other language. They hold a particular power over us because of their ability to shock us emotionally. They also have a unique ability to help us deal with pain, stress, and uncertainty.

Whether you swear a lot, or not at all (though that seems unlikely), next time you casually utter a "fuck" or "bugger", remember just how much history there is behind each of these words.



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1. http://www.openculture.com/2012/08/george_carlin_performs_his_seven_dirty_words_routine.html ↵
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## Belle Beth Cooper

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**Jay Zackery** • a year ago

"In particular, religion held enough sway over people for religious words like "damn" and "hell" to be the most offensive. Milch opted to swap out these words for modern equivalents (in terms of offensiveness) like "c\*\*ksucker"."

...So... a 6-year-old telling someone to "go to hell" is the equivalent to an adult calling them a "c\*\*ksucker," right? Seems right! (Sorry for the asterisks, I would be grounded if my mother saw my comment using that actual word)

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**MeymiGrou Mey** • a year ago

No new posts? What's going on? Miss reading your articles and tips.

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> **Belle** ➜ MeymiGrou Mey • a year ago
>
> Hey, thanks so much for your support! Sorry it's been so quiet lately. As I mentioned to **@wolfforama**, I've been hard at work on something new which hopefully won't be too far away from launching.
>
> ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›
>
>> **MeymiGrou Mey** ➜ Belle • a year ago
>>
>> Great to hear from you, Belle! Can't wait until I see a new article through my email. Maybe you will write about what you did all this time?
>>
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**wolfforama** • a year ago

Alright, now we know what makes swearing great. But -- where are you Belle? Anybody out there?

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

> **Belle** ➜ wolfforama • a year ago
>
> Hey, sorry about the downtime! I'm working on something new for Ghost that's really time-intensive to get up-and-running, which is why I haven't published anything new for a while. It's all coming together behind the scenes, but I'm also off sick at the moment so our launch has been pushed out a bit. Hopefully the wait will be worth it! Thanks for sticking with us :)
>
> ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›
>
>> **Vulkan** ➜ Belle • a year ago
>>
>> Glad to hear it's all a part of the plan. Well, except for the getting-sick part.
>>
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>>
>> **Jeb Baxley** ➜ Belle • a year ago

Thanks goodness! Hope you feel better and can't wait to see what you've all been up to. Cheers!

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**wolfforama** ➜ Belle • a year ago

Belle, that's good news! Can't wait to see/ hear what you and the Ghost devs are up to! Thanks for your repy and keep up the great work!

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**Mancala Parakin** • a year ago

Good read. Words became profane (or "naughty") over time because they came straight from nature, first spoken instinctively and involuntarily, recognised via the senses, no different than "eye," "mouth," or "belly." Before humankind was exposed to reason and discovered thought (keyword is "thought"), all words were crude (or "blunt"), therefore direct. If you read an anatomy atlas, you'll notice Romance/Latinate instead of Germanic/Anglo-Saxon terms for external reproductive and excretory parts. Chances are, that atlas was written when society deemed the primitive Germanic terms "bad" and the thought-based Romance terms "good." So, if someone were to ask me if it's unnatural to not swear, the answer would be yes. I've never sworn and, frankly, don't mind overriding primal functions.

The c-word is thought to be the mother-of-all-swear-words because, from what I recall, it's more than just primitive, it's a synecdoche, referring to both the female genitalia and the entire female. The word "queen," along with the c-word, apparently derives from a Proto-Indo-European root for "woman," which could say a lot about us millennia ago — that we were a polygynous species with little or no paternal investment, male nature was king, and females were thought of, no, seen, as seed vaults/baby mills and nothing else. Though the c-word doesn't rely on the penis like "vagina" does, it was (probably) the boys who first uttered it. As scary as it sounds, it makes a lot of sense, since polygyny without paternal investment is common in mammals. In fact, I wouldn't have survived if it weren't for thought!

Finally, from my observation, if a word in a given language, such as my native Russian, translates to an Anglo-Saxon swear word and/or is considered vulgar, it comes from nature, but if it translates to a Latinate term, it comes from reason, either as a euphemistic loanword or a modified native word.

Pardon the mouthful!

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**Belle** ➜ Mancala Parakin • a year ago

Thanks for the extra insight! There's so much history around language history and all the borrowed words, plus the way language evolves over time. I'll never be able to read all of it!

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**Jamie Whitehorn** • a year ago

Oh, Belgium man! Belgium! ;)

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**VistaOS** ➤ Jamie Whitehorn • a year ago

Eww, Belgium. Smell of piss and beer.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**D. Rose Gregory** • a year ago

I think people who swear a lot show themselves to have been badly brought up. I don't associate with people who swear like it's nothing. I consider them coarse, and I don't enjoy their company.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**Think Rational** ➤ D. Rose Gregory • a year ago

I think people who are offended by swearing are easily butthurt and perhaps arrogant. I don't care to associate with easily butthurt people and I think we all need to get the fuck over ourselves. Whether someone is good company has nothing to do with whether they swear.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**D. Rose Gregory** ➤ Think Rational • a year ago

Words are very important. The words and images you allow into your mind determine the kind of person you will become. The words and actions that come from you determine what others think of you, your family, and others who associate with you. It is not arrogant to want to operate on a plane of existence that allows you to be reverent and cherish the good things life has to offer without lowering yourself to accept any old thing the world throws at you. Vulgarity is vulgarity and a steady diet of it poisons the mind and soul of a person until his inner self is diseased. This word "fuck" that you throw around so casually, it describes the very act of sexual intercourse that brought you into this world. It takes something that is the essence of human existence, something precious and beautiful, sweet and loving, the act nature uses to produces the delicate and immensely valuable infant child, and it tears it down and makes something ugly out of it. Then people take this ugly word and throw it at each other to insult, bruise and hurt. People who use words like this habitually drive a wedge between themselves and persons of the opposite sex. They make it more difficult to attract a good partner and to have a loving relationship with another human being. Clean language does the opposite; it makes you seem like a gentleman and makes you more attractive to nice women. It tells people that you are worthy of respect and trust. It helps your children respect and admire you. It can help you acquire a better position in the world of work. It will help you respect yourself more, and what you think of yourself is ultimately the most important determiner of happiness.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

**Think Rational** ➤ D. Rose Gregory • a year ago

> "The words and images you allow into your mind determine

the kind of person you will become."

They may influence it but I decide who I am going to be.

> "the words and actions that come from you determine what others think of you, your family, and others who associate with you."

I definitely don't give a fuck what others think of me or my family.

> "Vulgarity is vulgarity and a steady diet of it poisons the mind and soul of a person until his inner self is diseased."

Vulgarity is man made and different even just within different countries or regions. It's only bad if you make it bad. Also, sounds a bit overly dramatic. There's no poisoning going on. Just using words that convey the meaning I intend.

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