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Are Your Words Holding You Back?

You're good enough, you're smart enough, and doggone it, people *like* you. So why do you — and lots of other capable women — sometimes sound so friggin' insecure? It's time for the way you talk to emphasize your best, most confident self.

By [Ellen Welty](#) Sep 18, 2007

Um, sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you'd want to read about this thing we women tend to do when we talk. It's this way we have of speaking where we kind of, like, put ourselves down, I think, without realizing it? Do you know what I mean? Oh, listen, this was probably a really stupid idea. It was just a thought, but jeez, I'm rambling. You must be so ready to, I don't know, turn the page, right?

Do yourself a favor and read on. Because if you're like most women, you regularly use some of the self-defeating speech habits illustrated above. That means you've been known, for instance, to tell others you have an idea, but that it's probably really lame — then you apologize for your really lame idea. You also may "kind of" give your needs short shrift (as in, "Gee, I was kind of hoping for an apology from you"). Sound familiar?

"Run my picture with this article," my friend Marion said. "Because I do all those things. I could make an 'L' for 'loser' on my forehead with my fingers while you take the picture."

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No, Marion, we won't do that. But the fact is, using self-deprecating words does lead people to think — and treat you as if — you're less capable than you really are, says psychiatrist Anna Fels, M.D., author of *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women's Changing Lives*. And then you start to think, *Hey, maybe I'm not really that smart or that good at stuff*. It's a pretty lousy chain reaction.

So let's break that chain, shall we? Read on and learn how to ditch the wimpy-sounding words and phrases that may be holding you back so you can say your piece with confidence and show the world — and, really, yourself — how strong and self-possessed you truly are.

"This is probably a stupid idea, but..."

File this mega-negative phrase alongside "I don't know if this is worth mentioning, but..." and "I have a feeling this won't work, but...." Why do we predict such doom for our ideas before they even leave our lips? "When girls are growing up, they learn that other girls won't like them if they act as if they're better than other people or as if their ideas are better than anyone else's," explains linguist Deborah Tannen, author of *I Only Say This Because I Love You*. "They learn that there's a social value to downplaying their ideas."

Fast-forward to adulthood: You sit down at a table with a group of people, you want them to like you, and so you unconsciously soft-pedal your suggestion for, say, improving the way the neighborhood block-association meetings run. Your intro: "I'm no expert, and it's probably obvious to everyone but me, but what if we...?" Trouble is, while you may succeed in getting people to like you because you're so nonthreatening, you've also made it far less likely that they'll really listen to anything you say because you've devalued your comments, explains Fels: "Then a man offers the same idea in a non-self-deprecating way, and suddenly everybody hears it and says, 'Whoa! That's a great idea!'"

Instead of trampling on your ideas, give them a simple, neutral intro such as, "I have an idea," "Here's my thought," or "What if we...?" You don't have to "sell" your idea if that's not your style — but you don't have to handicap it, either.

"Like"

You can thank the beat generation of half a century ago for launching the popularity of this little word (as in, "Like, wow!"). These days it's used as a substitute for "said" ("I was like, 'Get out of here!'"), to soften what you say ("I make, like, a decent salary"), and as a filler ("I went, like, to the mall, and it was, like, so crowded").

With its hipster image, "like" tries to pass itself off as cool, but it's a nonword, like "um" and "uh." Plus, "using 'like' makes you sound inarticulate and young -- in a *bad* way," says Diane DiResta, author of *Knockout Presentations*. So ditch it — you'll sound less tentative (read: way cooler) without it.

"Sorry!" "Oops, sorry." "Sorry, my bad!"

Women always seem to be on hyper-alert for reasons to apologize: We beg someone's pardon when we're not sure we heard them correctly or when we lose our train of thought. We ask forgiveness for our messy house when someone drops by unannounced (as if we should have had it spotless, waiting for them). Heck, if we "inconvenience" another woman by reaching for a shirt on a store rack at the same moment that we think she's reaching for it, we say, "Sorry!"

Enough with politely assuming we're always in the wrong or that we haven't measured up to others' expectations, says Judith Selee McClure, a communications expert and author of *Civilized Assertiveness for Women*. She advises women who attend her assertiveness workshops to replace "I'm sorry, I didn't catch that" with "Could you please repeat that?" She also urges them to abandon "Sorry, the house is really such a mess" for the far less neurotic "Please come in!" Adds McClure: "Even 'I apologize' is better than 'Sorry.' 'I apologize' is at least active; 'sorry' is a passive little word."

McClure says that it takes most women in her workshops a while to become convinced that they say the word "sorry" much too much, but that sooner or later, they all do. It clicked for one woman the day she dropped a zucchini at the supermarket and heard herself exclaim, "Oh, I'm sorry!" — to the zucchini.

"I think"

"I *think* I can handle this project." "I *think* I might be able to help you." "I *think* I'm a pretty good cook." Linguistics experts call this phrasing "a hedge." Knowingly or not, you're likely counting on those "I thinks" to help you hedge your bets and play it safe. After all, you've just implied that you might *not* be up to the task (of completing the project, helping, or supplying a tasty dinner). The result: Some people will get fed up with you for never committing yourself wholeheartedly. And others may tune you out because "I think" is a needless addition to the sentence (well, *of course* you think the thought — you're the one saying it).

"It's easy to say, 'I think,' especially if you feel intimidated," says Paulette Dale, author of "Did You Say Something, Susan?" How Any Woman Can Gain Confidence With Assertive Communication. But remember, you're not expected to be an expert on everything. And you have the right to ask questions or make comments unapologetically — even if only to say, "I need more information" as opposed to the timid "I *think* I need more information."

Amy Huber, an executive coach in the Houston area, helped a female exec conquer her "I think" habit. "Her bosses wouldn't send her on client meetings because she didn't seem confident," says Huber. After observing this woman at work, says Huber, "I realized she always said, 'I think so' — even in answer to simple yes-or-no questions such as, 'Are we on schedule?'" With practice, she changed her ways — and started meeting with clients regularly.

"Kind of" "Sort of"

These gems also fall into the hedge category, as in, "I was *kind of* expecting the advertised discount" or "I was *sort of* disappointed you forgot my birthday." Sure,

these modifiers protect you from confrontation, but the more you water down your convictions this way, the more you start to lose your sense of self (not to mention that advertised discount). Avoid them and you're apt to discover that (1) the much-feared confrontation isn't so unbearably stressful after all, and (2) it's a relief to stop hiding where you really stand on an issue.

Believe it or not, even the experts occasionally catch themselves using these noncommittal words. "Sometimes I hear myself hedging," admits linguistics professor Deborah Tannen. "I might start to say, 'It's sort of...,' then I'll stop myself, laugh, and say, 'Not *sort of*. It is.'"

"Just"

You call up a friend and announce, "Hi, it's just me." If someone at a party asks you what you do for a living, you answer, "Oh, I'm just a stay-at-home mom" (or "just an office manager," or whatever). "I hate when I do that!" screams 42-year-old Maria Iriondo, of Key Biscayne, FL, mother of a 5-year-old. "As if being a mother isn't a huge, important job!" Iriondo "justed" herself back in her career days, too. "Someone would ask, 'Oh, are you a doctor like your husband?' and I'd answer, 'No, I'm just a journalist.'"

Here's a solution: Stop using "just" to describe yourself and your life. Say, "Hi, it's me," instead of "it's just me." Tell friends you're "up for the usual" instead of "just the usual." And — you guessed it — when someone asks you what you do with your days, reply with *just* "I'm a stay-at-home mom" (or whatever).

Added benefit: Because you haven't minimized your role or importance with that insidious little adverb, the person talking to you will likely ask you more questions about your life — and treat what you do as if it's, ahem, *just* as important as what they do. Which, of course, it is.

"Hi, it's me? I can do lunch on Friday?"(and any other statement you make sound like a question)

When you let your voice rise at the end of a sentence that's not a question, you're "uptalking." Do it too much and you can start to sound like a ditz. (Need proof? Fill in the blanks and listen to yourself as you say the following out loud: "Hi, my name is ____? I live in ____?")

Some experts theorize that women may be drawn to uptalk because it fits in with the common female desire for others' approval. You call out to your family, "I'm making burgers? We'll eat at 6?" That question-type style of speaking "conveys tentativeness and is a way of hesitating or asking others for their permission," says Fels; it's another way of saying, "If that's okay with you."

You may not mind appearing so accommodating to your nearest and dearest, but beware of slipping into uptalk when you're making arrangements with others. Example: Tell a babysitter, "I need you at 5?" and she may decide you're a pushover who won't balk if she shows up late. When a guy at your yard sale asks how much you want for your lawn chairs and you answer with "\$25?" he'll figure he can bargain you down. And at your next job interview, when your prospective boss asks, "How much do you think you're worth?" do not say, "X dollars?" Instead, state firmly, "X dollars" — as if there's no question you know what you're worth.



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BYE-BYE, WIMPY WORDS

Quit waffling and downplaying your worth. Follow this plan to banish self-defeating talk and put more me-power behind your words.

- 1. Pick one word, phrase, or other negative speech habit to focus on at a time.**
- 2. Spend several days noticing when, and around whom, you use it.** Maybe you get rattled around salespeople or competitive coworkers. If you know who sets you off, you can prepare yourself beforehand for what you're *not* going to say — and what you'll say instead.
- 3. Share your goal with a friend or two.** You may well discover that she has the same problem; then it becomes something you two can conquer together.

4. Ask one of those pals to give you a signal (say, a raised eyebrow) every time you use a self-deprecating phrase to increase your awareness of that habit and eventually short-circuit it.

5. Leave yourself some reminders of the shift in phrasing you want to make.

Example: Put a Post-it on your day planner that says, "Here's my idea..." so you'll say that instead of "I'm sure this is a dumb idea, but...."

6. Record yourself (1) using the word or phrase in all its awfulness and (2) restating the same thought in the desired way. You'll train your ear and speed up the process of learning the new speech habit.

7. Remind yourself — aloud, to reinforce the message to your brain — "I want to stop saying X because I want people I meet to stop dismissing my thoughts."

8. Be patient. It takes about a month to change a behavior, so don't let slipups deter you.

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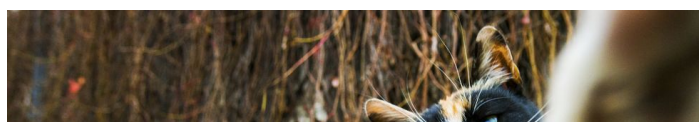


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