



Re-Thinking Word Choice During This Pandemic

“The words we choose to use when we communicate with each other, carry vibrations. The word ‘war’ carries a whole different vibration than the word ‘peace’. The words we use are showing how we think and how we feel. The careful selection of words, helps to elevate our consciousness and resonate in higher frequencies.”

— Grigoris Deoudis

As healthcare organizations globally focus on emergency preparedness, containment, ensuring access to critical supplies, and keeping communities safe, it may seem trivial to call attention to the language being used throughout care centers to describe the COVID-19 pandemic. And yet, as the quote above so eloquently articulates, words matter.

The words we choose to communicate what we are doing, how we are doing it, why and for and by whom sends powerful messages to recipients about the current state of events. In many corners of the world, the state of urgency around COVID-19 has resulted in widespread use of “war-speak.” We hear of “*the war against Coronavirus*,” hospitals being “*under siege*,” staff “*on the frontlines*” who are “*going into battle*” while many communities are “*hunkered down*.”

To be fair, in many ways equating the COVID-19 situation to a war seems accurate – especially for those in the thick of planning, rationing supplies and caring for the sickest of patients. And the case can certainly be made that nothing mobilizes collective action like a “*battle cry*.”

However, the language of war is inherently hostile and cold. Knowing the words we use and the words we constantly hear are shaping our perspective, we must proactively ensure that our word choice and how we communicate is never seen as combative, unsympathetic and, in fact, inhospitable. The more we use words that evoke thoughts of being in a war, the more we may be adding to the way others’ view their current experience. We may unintentionally be encouraging an increasingly negative world view that could feel hopeless, helpless, victimized, etc.

Even during (*especially during!*) a global pandemic, we are all part of a healing and caring profession. We are trusted advisors, sources of compassion, reassurance and empathy. Our patients, their loved ones and our workforce are, understandably, beset by uncertainty and anxiety of what is to come. They are looking to us and taking cues from the language we use to shape the way they think about this pandemic and the future. We all have the opportunity to nurture a positive outlook for tomorrow in the way we communicate today.

Here we provide some suggestions of language choices that reflect the realities of what we are living through while continuing to provide assurance, compassion and comfort.

<i>Instead of...</i>	<i>Consider this...</i>	<i>Why?</i>
On the frontline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct caregiver • Working directly with patients and the public • Meeting immediate needs 	The alternative phrases reinforce healthcare workers' roles as caregivers tending to the needs of the most vulnerable, not fighters battling an enemy.
In the trenches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the point of care • At the point of service 	
Under siege	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenged • Operating in challenging conditions • Experiencing higher volumes • Implementing higher volume or surge procedures 	"Under siege" evokes feelings of combat and attack that may create additional anxiety, suggesting to patients, families and staff that an overwhelmed system will fail to meet their needs.
Social Distancing	Physical Distancing	The phrase "physical distancing" better represents the intent of limiting physical contact and still encouraging social connection
Lockdown; Hunkered Down	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelter-in-place 	"Shelter-in-place" provides clear cut guidance without the wartime connotations
COVID patient, COVID case, "hot one"	Patient with COVID-19	Person-first language guards against dehumanizing patients. It acknowledges the humanity of the individual with the diagnosis.
Non-essential workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-patient facing positions • Indirect care team members 	Non-essential connotes not needed, irrelevant, or unimportant. Literally as an adjective "too small or unimportant to be worth consideration!"
No Visitors	Visitation is temporarily suspended to protect you and your loved ones. Exceptions will be made for special circumstances, including pediatric care, end-of-life care and childbirth.	The alternative phrase communicates the restrictions with caring and includes an explanation of why and what to expect.
Command Center	Assessment and Monitoring Center	The alternative name emphasizes the primary aim is to anticipate needs and identify ways to address those needs.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[HeartBeat \(September 2018\): A War with Words](#)

[20 Healthcare Phrases to Retire](#)