



# Back to swear one: A review of English language literature on swearing and cursing in Western health settings



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 10 December 2014  
 Received in revised form 10 July 2015  
 Accepted 15 July 2015  
 Available online 23 July 2015

### Keywords:

Cursing  
 Swearing  
 Taboo  
 Verbal aggression  
 Gender  
 Healthcare services

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on swearing in English with particular emphasis on healthcare contexts, a previously neglected area of research. The review commences with a discussion of the nature of swearing, definitional considerations, and its prevalence. This is followed by an outline of the uses and functions of swearwords, and discussion of those aspects of swearing linked to illness, aggression, gender, and mental health problems. The final section focuses on the importance of appropriate responses to swearing to the practice of health professionals, in particular, those within the nursing profession.

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*I think the reason that swearing is both so offensive and so attractive is that it is a way to push people's emotional buttons and especially their negative emotional buttons. Because words soak up emotional connotations and are processed involuntarily by the listener, you can't will yourself not to treat the word in terms of what it means. (Pinker interviewed by Long, 2007)*

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to review the literature on swearing in English with particular emphasis on healthcare contexts, a previously neglected area of research. The review commences with a discussion of the nature of swearing, definitional considerations and its prevalence. This is followed by an outline of the uses and functions of swearwords, and discussion of those aspects of swearing linked to illness, aggression, gender, and mental health problems. The final section discusses the importance of appropriate responses to swearing to the practice of health professionals, in particular those within the nursing profession.

Swearing has been identified as an issue in the media, education, and health industries, where “swearwords are particularly important in terms of personality and culture” (Hartogs & Fantel, 1967, p.18). Thelwall (2008) has noted the role that swearing plays in the expression of anger, fear, and surprise and also how it can be linked to gender roles. The impact of workplace exposure to swearing would seem to be an important topic given possible links to distress, occupational stress, anxiety, job turnover, and adverse effects on employee to employee and employee to consumer relationships.

While there is a growing body of literature on verbal aggression in health settings around the globe (Anderson & Clarke, 1996; Foster, Bowers, & Nijman, 2007; Kwok et al., 2006; Maguire & Ryan, 2007; Werner, Yesavage, Becker, Brunsting, & Isaacs, 1983; Whittington & Patterson, 1996) swearing in health settings—which is frequently a part of verbal aggression, has rarely been discussed.

Several terms have been used in relation to swearing. Americans often refer to “cursing” and other expressions in wide usage include “bad language”, “obscene language”, and “dirty words”. Expletives, blasphemy, and profanity have been used synonymously. However, the latter terms are to be distinguished from swearing in that they aim to insult religion, whereas swearing need not be specifically blasphemous (McEnergy, 2006). In this review the term “swearing” will be used.

Strong language has been used in a number of places throughout the article and it is recognized that this may cause offense for some readers. It felt important to highlight how swearing might be experienced by nurses and other health professionals on a daily and sometimes hourly basis as well as to consider links between swearing exposure and distress and job turnover (Johnson & Rea, 2009; Speroni, Fitch, Dawson, Dugan, & Atherton, 2014) adverse effects on therapeutic relationships (Rowe & Sherlock, 2005; Stone, McMillan, & Hazelton, 2010); and the risk of physical injury (Sabbath et al., 2014).

### 1.1. Definitional aspects

The type of words considered as swearing change over time and between cultural groups (Morrison, 1993) and are generally defined by social codes. Swearing thus resists concrete definition (Beers Fagersten, 2000). Some commentators have stressed the emotional expressiveness and aggressive intent that often accompanies swearing (Kidman, 1993; Montagu, 1967). The greater its potential to offend the more likely a word is to be considered a swearword (Beers Fagersten, 2000).

The definition of swearing used in this article extends the work of Andersson and Trudgill (1990). In this approach swearwords are those which:

1. Refer to something that is taboo, offensive, impolite, or forbidden in the culture;
2. Can be used to express strong emotions, most usually of anger;

3. May evoke strong emotions, most usually of anger or anxiety;
4. Include the strongest and most offensive words in a culture—stronger than slang and colloquial language; and
5. May also be used in a humorous way and can be a marker of group identity (Stone & McMillan, 2012).

This definition recognizes an aggressive form of swearing which may cause distress when directed toward health professionals and other workers, but also notes the ways in which swearing can be used to “mirror the patient's style of language” (Zimmerman & Stern, 2010, p.382) to create a feeling of social equality and enable empathy.

### 1.2. Types of swearing

Many attempts have been made to define, classify, and characterize swearwords, for example into religious, sexual, or excretory categories. However, such classifications have been criticized for failing to capture the cultural dimensions of the phenomenon (Kidman, 1993; Wajnryb, 2004). A method more pertinent for this review is categorisation by function. Stone, McMillan, Hazelton, and Clayton (2011) study in an Australian health setting found swearing was most often used in anger or in conversation. As an instance of the angry use of swearing, Stone et al. (2011) describe how a patient who had been refused access to cigarettes by ward staff, screamed obscenities and abuse, and threw an ashtray at a nurse. Conversational swearing was reported by Stone et al. (2010) as being common among nurses—“part of the language”, although some of the participants in the study described how they moderated their use of language among non-swearers. Other functions of swearing may include humor, to establish group identity by affirming in-group status and establish boundaries and social norms for language (Dewaele, 2004). Nurses in Stone's (2009) study reported mainly males swearing “to join in (fit in)” and as a marker of comfort among friends and colleagues.

Swearwords are used primarily in a connotative way (Taylor, 1995), referring to the emotional nuances commonly associated with swearing, whereas denotation refers to more literal meaning. Australian nurses described using swearing in this way, “Saying ‘I know you feel like shit’ to let the patient know I had some empathy for the way he was feeling and in a language they used and understood” (Stone, 2009). In the same study, swearwords were often used in a more literal way in clinical settings when clients could not understand medical terms. As one respondent described:

*Persuading an elderly gentleman with alcohol brain damage to use the toilet: He responded to rough language including “piss” and “shit”. Polite language would have had an effect of blocking communication.*

[(Stone, 2009)]

In cases such as this, the use of taboo words was not intended to offend. However, it is acknowledged that a bystander unaware of the context may be offended.

## 2. Prevalence

It has proven difficult to establish the prevalence of swearing. Cameron (1969) found that swearing comprised 8.06% of the average college vocabulary, 12.7% of leisure conversation and 3.5% of work conversation, with 7 swearwords in the list of 50 most frequently used words. A decade further on, Jay (1980) found that swearword usage was less than 1% in the conversations of college and school students, with the words “fuck(in)”, “shit”, “god(damn)” and “hell” accounting for most of the swearing recorded. In another study, Jay (1977) observed that the association between word frequency and offensiveness was usually an inverse one—the greater the offensiveness the less the word was used in public. However, the words “fuck” and “shit” were exceptions, accounting for about 50% of swearing in public.

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