

# ‘I want to like, hire you, but like ... really?’

By Shari Graydon

Thu., May 23, 2019

The disease is highly contagious and there’s no vaccine. That’s the bad news. The good news is there is a cure. It requires no doctors or pharmacists, but a bit of mindfulness (perhaps supplemented by a small monetary incentive) and the enrolment of close colleagues and family members.

I’m talking about the vocal tag epidemic in which the interjection of “like” — or “I mean” or “you know” — has become as ubiquitous in some young people’s speech as birdsong in a Canadian spring (but not a fraction as pleasing to the ear).

In recent months, I’ve been fortunate to interact with activist teens, graduate engineering students, aspiring journalists and international development researchers. Intelligent, industrious and energetic, they’ve left me inspired by their intellectual gifts and commitment to making the world a better place.

I think many may also be extremely articulate, but that’s a harder call. Because the repetition of a single, misused word or phrase interrupts the flow of their ideas and renders every sentence a mottled pastiche of insights and valley girl talk.

Verbal crutches are common. Many of us unconsciously insert an occasional (or frequent) “um” or “ah” into our speech to buy thinking time. Others overuse “really” or tag “right?” onto the ends of sentences to engender agreement. And still others develop the habit of defaulting to “literally” or “in point of fact” for emphasis.

Nor is the dependency purely a symptom of youth. I’ve noticed similar verbal tics in corporate executives and university lecturers, policy experts and politicians.

These examples may suggest that such speech habits aren’t a deterrent to impact. Indeed, some have argued that speakers in intimidating positions who occasionally use filler words

can come across as more relatable. And it's true that not all listeners are as attentive to repetitive verbal crutches as someone who speaks often and trains others to do so, too.

But if a good portion of your airtime is devoted to meaningless words, they can't help but detract from the substance of what you're saying.

An overdependence on filler phrases undermines perceptions of your intelligence by at least some of your listeners. And that limits your opportunities — even if almost no one will tell you that you didn't get hired, or invited to speak, or paid what you asked, because you sound like a hesitant 15-year-old.

So, if you suspect yourself of relying on a verbal crutch or overusing one particular word until it becomes meaningless, here's the three-phase cure:

- **Cultivate Awareness**

Audio-record your voice when hanging out with friends or speaking with colleagues. Play the recording back and pay attention to repeated phrases or inserted tags. Replay it, marking a piece of paper every time you notice the crutch. Then listen a third time and try not to notice it.

Start to pay attention to the speech habits of others you interact with every day, especially your close friends, family members or colleagues. Are you reinfecting or reinforcing each other?

- **Clarify your Motivation**

Think about the significant time and financial investments you've made in your own advancement: college diplomas, university degrees, professional accreditation, years of hard work, overtime, missed weekends or vacations ...

Reflect on what other ambitions you may harbour: Promotion within your organization, a career change to another industry or leadership status of any kind.

- **Recruit Accountability Buddies**

Deputize one or two people with whom you spend a lot of time to start counting how often you utter the crutch and commit to putting a loonie in a jar for every offence. Allow your accountability buddies to determine how the money gets spent.

Respond to your growing awareness by replacing your verbal crutches with pauses. This may feel awkward at first, but pause-inflected speech allows you to think, and others to absorb or reflect on, what you're saying.

Create a calendar item that reminds you to re-record yourself every few weeks to note your improvement or backsliding.

If you're gifted with both the ability to speak and people willing to listen, making every word meaningful is one route to a healthy — and impactful — future.

Shari Graydon is the founder and catalyst of Informed Opinions, working to amplify women's voices for a more democratic Canada. @ShariGraydon