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LIFE & STYLE

We're Cursing More. Blame the #%\$ Pandemic.

Stress, the erosion of boundaries between personal and professional, and an exhausted slide toward casualness have created a perfect storm for swearing

By [Anne Marie Chaker](#)

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In November, Jay Rosenthal unexpectedly found himself uttering a curse word—at his children's school.

He's on the board there, and he and some fellow board members were touring impressive new classrooms for the first time. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed.

It's not language he would have used before the pandemic. But he says the two-year slog has pulled his guard down and made him more casual in many of his interactions. Part of it is Zoom, he says: He has spent hours in virtual meetings with co-workers and school board members, staring into people's kitchens and living rooms while their pets and children walk by. The old boundaries between work and home have blurred, reducing formalities and often forging foxhole bonds during difficult times.

"Artificial walls came down," says Mr. Rosenthal, a Toronto-based founder of a media company.

Pandemic stress, the melding of personal and professional spheres, and an exhausted slide toward casualness are making many of us swear more. It is "a perfect swearing storm," says Michael Adams, a linguist at Indiana University Bloomington.

Mentions of f—, shit and asshole, or related variations, rose 41% from full-year 2019 to 2021 through the end of November on Facebook and 27% on Twitter, according to Storyful, a news and intelligence agency. Storyful is owned by News Corp, the parent company of The Wall Street Journal.

Denver-based Inversoft Inc.'s CleanSpeak profanity-filtering software, which is used by companies that host online communities and other discussion forums, says the volume of filtered words has more than tripled in the past 18 months.

"People are becoming more aggressive in their use of profane and sexually explicit terms," says Inversoft's Chief Executive Don Bergal.

Cursing 'is the yoga pants and Uggs of language.'

— Tracy Brady, a communications executive in Boston

Swearing can activate a natural defense against pain, says Richard Stephens, a psychologist at Keele University in the U.K. who has studied the effect of emotional language on pain management. His 2009 study found that undergraduates were able to submerge their hands in ice water for 40 seconds longer, on average, when they uttered a curse word of their choice repeatedly. By arousing part of the nervous system and elevating the heart rate, cursing induces a stimulation, he says, that can have a pain-alleviating effect.

Dropping a curse word here and there can also demonstrate comfort with someone else. "It's something you're not supposed to be doing, but you trust them," says Dr. Adams. "It's a sign of intimacy." He says people are seeking this type of connection as they experience tectonic life shifts while often feeling isolated from their colleagues. "We're using what we've got," he says.

Tracy Brady, a communications executive in Boston who has found herself swearing more during the pandemic, likens the relaxing of language to a parallel relaxation of how we dress now.

Cursing "is the yoga pants and Uggs of language," says Ms. Brady.

During a recent work call from home, Ms. Brady overheard her two teenage sons squabbling in the kitchen about a takeout order. The 13-year-old accused the 14-year-old of having forgotten a condiment on purpose. "What the f—," said one. "You're such a f—ing asshole," said the other.

Ms. Brady ran upstairs to break up the fight, intending to reprimand the children about swearing. Instead, she blurted out: "What the f— is going on here?" she says. "I came running to yell at them about swearing, but then slipped."

Ms. Brady says she also relies more on cursing now as a way to bond and laugh with other colleagues and parents during stressful times. During a virtual back-to-school night recently, she sat through a presentation on navigating student schedules virtually.

Befuddled, she texted two other parents: “Does anyone else feel like a f—ing moron?”

Some career experts say that cursing still is questionable in work settings. Executive speech coach Diane DiResta cautions against using profanity at the office. “It’s too risky,” she says, partly because what sounds acceptable to one person’s ears may be offensive to someone else, and it is sometimes hard to toe that line.

Yet swearing can convey a kind of grittiness, or an appealing edge, say branding experts.

“If it’s used judiciously, it can be a spotlight, an exclamation point, a way to break out and seem authentic,” says Allen Adamson, co-founder of brand-consulting firm Metaforce. Yet too much swearing can undercut the substance of the speaker’s message, he adds.

In Toronto, Mr. Rosenthal sits on a couple of boards, and says he is no longer censoring his language during board conversations. “It is more expressive sometimes. And it’s how people genuinely talk to each other.”

Amy Platt, head of school for the Paul Penna Downtown Jewish Day School, witnessed the moment Mr. Rosenthal uttered the swear word in front of the other board members. She says she wasn’t put off. Touring the building “was a deeply exciting and emotional moment,” she says.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How do you rein in the urge to curse? Join the conversation below.

Roxana Lissa, a managing director for an advertising agency in Los Angeles, says she and her colleagues are communicating in a faster and more relaxed way over Microsoft Teams while working from home during the pandemic. The quicker, more casual tone means more swearing in some cases, she says.

By her own count, she has typed the word “shit” more than 50 times to colleagues in messages over the last eight months on Teams, she says. (Over email, she says, where her notes are more thoughtfully composed, she exhibits restraint.)

On Nov. 9, she wrote to colleague Jonathan Hastings, a director of business development, about a new business pitch: “I need help putting this shit together.” He agreed and suggested that two other colleagues pitch in.

Mr. Hastings says he wasn't offended. “If I'm being honest, I probably didn't even notice,” he says. Now that colleagues are meeting from their kitchens or dens rather than a conference room or an office, an “office filter has been taken down,” he says.

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