



Appropriate Language Use in Trauma Workforce Briefing



Trauma Informed
Stoke-on-Trent
and Staffordshire

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TRAUMA INFORMED CONSULTANCY SERVICES

Planning Our Language

Examples of phrases for cultivating safety

- Is it okay if we talk about your experiences, or would you prefer to discuss how you're feeling right now?
- Do you feel comfortable continuing this conversation, or would you like to take a break or talk about something else?
- It makes sense you'd feel that way given what you've been through. (This sort of phrase can support you to validate experiences, demonstrating your empathy).
- You aren't alone with this anymore, I am here for you but I understand if you aren't ready to share right now. We can try again later...

Examples of phrases for cultivating trustworthiness

- What ways I can support you right now that would be most helpful? (this shows that you care about their needs and that they can depend on you).
- I want to be honest with you about my role and what I can do to support you.

Examples of phrases for cultivating choice

- We need to have an honest conversation about... today. Where would you feel most comfortable/safest sitting?
- Are you comfortable having this conversation with just the two of us or is there someone else you would like to have in the room with you?
- There might be some questions I ask you today that might be difficult. Would you like to write draw or speak? Or is there another way that is most comfortable for you?
- Tell me when/if you need a break, and we can take one. You are in complete control of how we do things today.

Examples of phrases for cultivating collaboration

- What do you think might help? What do you think you need?
- If we were to draw a picture of how we can work together, what would you add to it?

Summary

Grasping the profound impact our words can have is vital. Language can trigger a spectrum of responses, from emotional and psychological to physical. Thus, choosing our words with sensitivity and care is paramount.

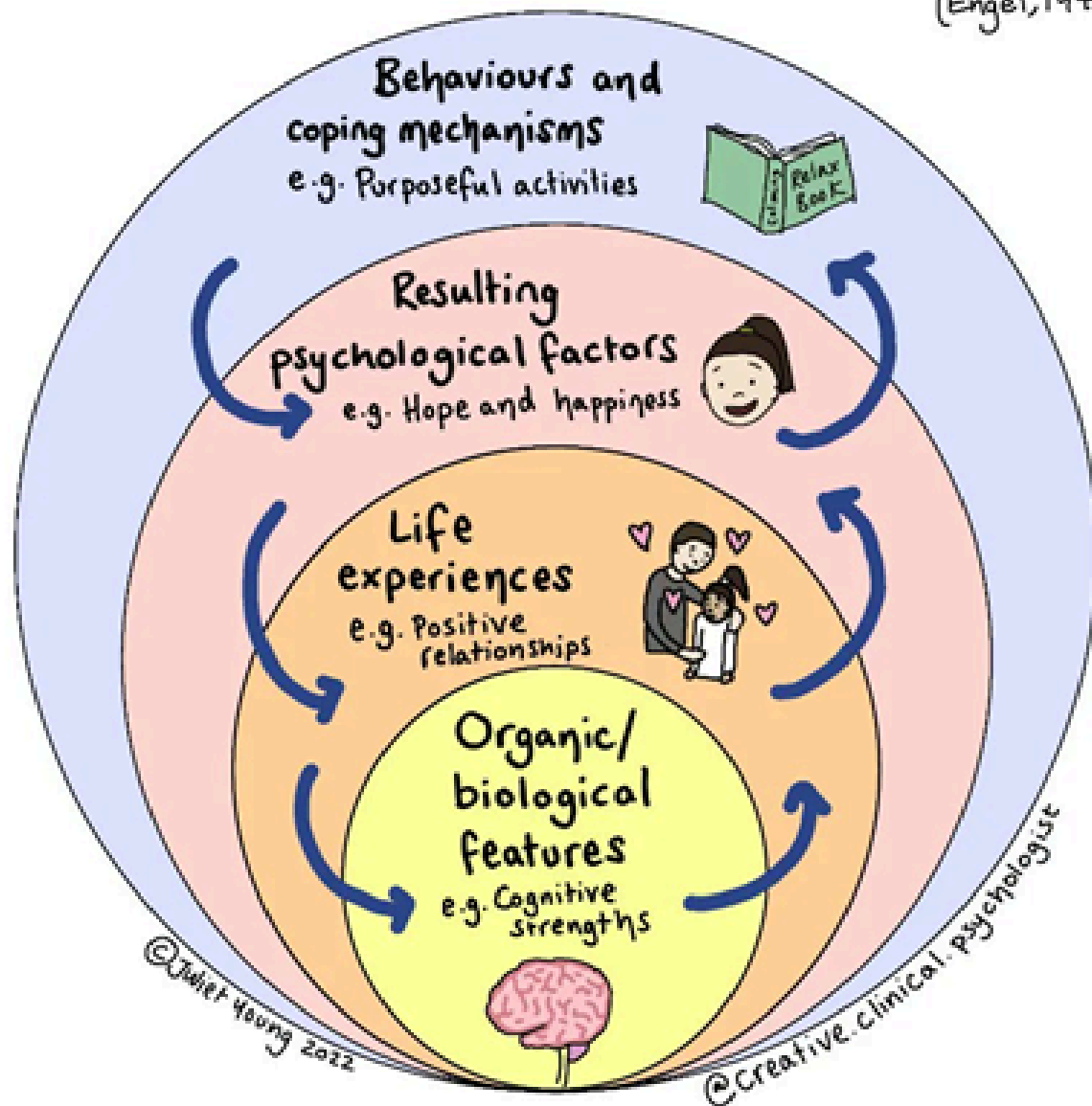
Recognising and Avoiding Trauma-Triggering Language

Specific phrases, though possibly well-meaning, can accidentally trigger trauma responses. You might like to spend a few minutes watching this Brené Brown [clip](#).

Examples of phrases to avoid	Better phrases to use
Stop Crying.	It's okay to cry.
Don't be scared. There's nothing to be afraid of.	It's okay to feel scared. I'm right here with you.
You're okay. It's not that bad.	I can see you're upset. Do you want to tell me about it.
You need to tell me what happened now so I can help you.	Whenever you feel like talking about it, I am here for you.
You are being difficult and I am trying to help.	You seem upset. Let's work this out together.

Bio-psychosocial model of Strength

(Engel, 1977)



Avoid Pathologising Language: Pathologising language refers to taking a deficits/weakness approach to our communications and professional practice. For example, rather than saying "You have a problem," swap it for "You are facing a challenge." Through this approach, we see the **WHOLE** child.

Cultural Sensitivity in Language Use

Cultural competence in trauma-informed care requires us to fully respect the varied cultural histories and unique backgrounds of the children and young people we are working with. It requires an awareness of how culture impacts the expression of and reactions to trauma, as well as how it shapes the healing process.

Some things to try:

- Are there any special comfort objects or things you do at home that help you? This allows the child know you are comfortable with their cultural practices and that you are non-judgemental.
- Who in your life is really good at helping you feel safe? What do they do that helps? Such a question but help you to establish if there are any culturally specific comforting practices that you might be able to practically facilitate.
- Is there a story, song, or prayer from your culture that helps you? Can you tell me about it? Through a question like this, you can generate a discussion which is respectful of cultural heritage as well as establishing what helps the child.
- Are there things that you wish others knew about your culture when they're trying to help you? Can you share them with me? The child can take an active role here in educating you and taking control of what they share. This can be hugely empowering and validating.

Navigating Difficult Conversations

Creating a safe space

- Visual cues in the environment, such as calm colours, comfortable seating, and the option to control elements like lighting, can also contribute to a perceived sense of safety if possible. Sometimes this is a luxury so just work with what you've got.
- Verbally affirm that it's okay to share only what feels comfortable and that their feelings and experiences are valid and important, regardless of what they choose to disclose.

Islands of Safety

Before diving into the dark waters of someone's trauma, it can be helpful to map out the islands of safety in their life narrative.



Using gentle inquiry

- Make use of the open-ended questions contained in this guide to gently explore what you need to with the child.
- Open-ended questions allow the child to disclose as much or as little as they feel able to in the moment.
- It's crucial to avoid "why" questions, which can unintentionally imply judgment. Instead, focus on "what" and "how" questions to promote non-judgemental, safe sharing.

Staying present

- Try to reduce distractions for yourself.
- Use encouraging tones, nodding your head, appropriate eye contact, and, if you can, mirroring their positioning.
- Active listening is key; reflect back what you've heard to demonstrate that you are genuinely listening and taking note of what they are telling you.

Useful resources and links

Dr Lisa Cherry (2021) Conversations that Make a Difference for Children and Young People: Relationship-Focused Practice from the Frontline. Routledge.

Collins, H.K. (2023). When listening is spoken. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 47.

Mind (2023). Mental health language. Available from:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/media/7582/mental-health-language.pdf> [Accessed: 31.03.2024].



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