



Appropriate Language Use in Trauma Full Explainer Guide



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Introduction

Language is not just a tool for communication; it reflects and influences almost all our daily interactions and the atmospheres we inhabit. Our language choices are so important within the delicate work we do with ourselves or others around trauma and healing. It is possible to both repair and rebuild damage when interacting with those who have experienced trauma. This guide delves into the essence of trauma-informed language, demonstrating how we can draw on the principles set out by **SAMHSA**. You may find it useful to consider an individual you have recently supported and reflect on how some of this knowledge could support you with similar situations in the future.

Principles of Trauma-Informed Language

At the core of trauma-informed language are five principles that form a scaffold for nurturing communication. For those of you who have already accessed some of the other guides and presentations, you may recognise some of these principles. Here, we consider them through the lens of language. We have included some prompts which might stimulate your thinking but it is not intended that these will be used as a script. As a minimum, you will need to adapt these depending on the age and situation of the individual you are talking with.

Safety: The main principle regarding language is that we must ensure it does not unintentionally harm or re-traumatise. This involves being mindful of the power of words to evoke distress and making conscious choices to use language that fosters a sense of security and comfort.

When engaging in conversations with individuals who have experienced trauma, these sorts of questions and phrases can help you create a supportive and safe dialogue:

- Is it okay if we talk about your experiences, or would you prefer to discuss how you're feeling right now? (This prompt reflects offering a choice when we can).
- Do you feel comfortable continuing this conversation, or would you like to take a break or talk about something else? (This is an example of how you can support the individual to control the speed of the conversation and set their own boundaries. Pushing someone to talk before they are ready can be very damaging).
- 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... (For those who have experienced trauma, they can often feel very alone. For young people, they could have been keeping their experiences secret. Sharing their story can feel very exposing. Here, you can show solidarity and respect).

Trustworthiness: Building trust through language requires consistency, reliability, and transparency. It is essential when working with those who have experienced trauma as

quite often, their trust may have been broken, creating a sense of caution around others. Some suggestions of how we can demonstrate our trustworthiness and dependability are:

- What are some 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...(Not making promises we cant keep is vital so using a phrase such as this one can demonstrate that you are honest).

Choice: Empowering individuals by recognising their autonomy and giving them choices in how they wish to communicate encourages empowerment. It's about offering control back to those who may feel it was taken from them. Here are some prompts and questions that might support your language choices around this:

- 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. You are in complete control about how we do things today.

Collaboration: Emphasising collaboration through language fosters a sense of partnership. It's about ensuring their voice is heard and valued. When communicating with children who have experienced trauma, it's important to use language that is age-appropriate, simple, and reassuring.

- 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 the picture?

Empowerment: Empowerment-focused language highlights strengths, resilience, and the potential for recovery. It provides hope for a future. 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.

Reflection: From this section, what is something you are already doing well? What can you do to improve your use of language in other ways?

Recognising and Avoiding Trauma-Triggering Language

Specific phrases, though possibly well-meaning, can accidentally trigger trauma responses. Phrases including “It could have been worse” or that start with “at least” can unintentionally minimise trauma and cause distress to the individual. You might like to spend a few minutes watching this Brené Brown [clip](#). It takes a light hearted approach to this topic but has a serious meaning behind it.

Sadly, there is no magic fix to automatically recognise and avoid trauma-triggering language. But, what we can do, is take as many opportunities to seek feedback from those we work with and gradually work on refining our language.

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.

These alternative phrases are more likely to help children feel understood and safe, providing them with the emotional support they need. The language is framed to be affirming, patient, and encouraging, which can help children learn to process and communicate their emotions effectively.

Reflection: Imagine this scenario. You over hear a colleague talking to a child and they use one of the phrases to avoid from the table above. What would you do?



Empowering and Respectful Language Choices

Using empowering language can reinforce an individual's sense of self-worth and their feelings of control which are essential drivers to support recovery and healing. Below are some suggested strategies you could try.

Acknowledging without judgment: Try to listen attentively and respond in a way that conveys understanding and acceptance. For instance:

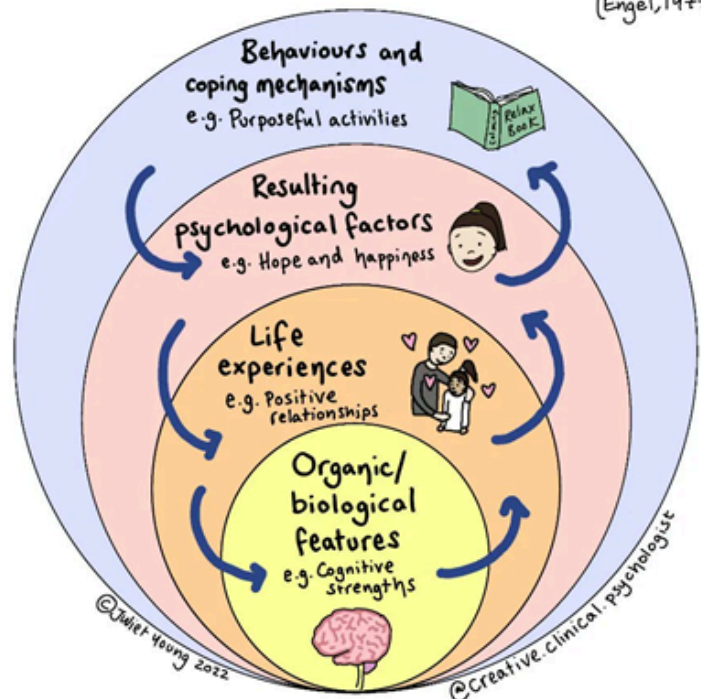
"It sounds like this has all been very difficult. You have been very brave sharing it with me. Thank you."

This type of language acknowledges the child's experiences without placing blame or making assumptions. It validates the child's emotional response to their experiences and affirms the bravery involved in their communication.

Celebrating strength and resilience: Look out for opportunities to praise and recognise how strong they are being/have been. Emphasise their progress, even if it is small. You could be the first person in their life to do this!

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." This will help the child to realise that we are not blaming them or defining them entirely by their trauma. Through this approach, we see the WHOLE child.

Bio-psychosocial model of Strength (Engel, 1977)



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.

Children from different cultural backgrounds may have unique ways of understanding and coping with trauma. For instance, some cultures may prioritise collective well-being over individual expression, which could influence a child's willingness to share their experiences openly. Cultural competence ensures that professionals are not only aware of these differences but are also actively working to respect and accommodate them in their approach.

Communicating respectfully with children from diverse backgrounds means being mindful of language and behaviours that honour their cultural practices and values. It includes using inclusive language that does not alienate or stereotype based on culture, ethnicity, or race.

Some things to try:

Active listening and responding: Reflecting back to the child what you have taken from what they have said enables you to check your understanding of what the child has said and enable them to correct any inaccuracies. Using phrases including, "It sounds like that was really [insert feeling here] for you."

Within your responses, don't forget validation as previously discussed. Pair this with open-ended questions so that we can hear the child's experiences in their own words. Such as, "Can you tell me about your experience?" or, in your own words, "can you describe what has happened today?" "Can you tell me about these bruises on your arms?"

What do I do if the child is reluctant to discuss anything with me? Try to find out about their family or culture and what might help them to feel more comfortable.

Raising your awareness: Try to learn about the cultural norms and values of those you are working with or at least of the main cultures within the community you serve. This will enable you to demonstrate more cultural sensitive language skills. You might need to do some research to do this properly.

Be mindful of your nonverbal language: Be aware that nonverbal communication can vary greatly across cultures. What is comforting in one culture may not be in another. Ensure that you tell the child at the beginning of each separate exchange that it is ok to let you know if you do something or say something that they do not find comforting. We cannot possibly everything but we can stay humble and open to feedback so we can learn when we don't quite get things right.

Ask, don't assume: Even if we are very experienced and have worked with many individuals from differing backgrounds, we must make no assumptions about a child's cultural practices or beliefs. Instead, ask respectful questions to gain understanding.

You might find it useful to consider some of these questions:

- 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.

These questions are not only intended to gather information but also to demonstrate to the child that their cultural background is understood, respected, and incorporated into their care.

Navigating Difficult Conversations

Navigating difficult conversations, especially where children and young people are concerned takes a lot of courage from both the professional and the child. We must always seek to prioritise their safety and comfort. You will also find some useful strategies to support your own wellbeing in the Vicarious Trauma presentation and explainer guide. However, in this section, we will be thinking from the perspective of the child.

Creating a safe space

- Creating a safe space is imperative when preparing to discuss sensitive topics. This means more than just a physically comfortable environment; it involves cultivating an atmosphere where individuals feel emotionally secure and respected.

- 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.

- It's important to 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

Although this can be challenging for us, 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 and always reflect back what you've heard to demonstrate that you are genuinely listening and taking note of what they are telling you. Again, really useful for checking for inaccuracies.

This also requires you to be aware of your own reactions and emotions, Try not to convey disgust, anger or surprise but instead, talk in a slow, steady, calm voice even if you aren't feeling their way on the inside.

Conclusion

From this learning, we hope that you feel ready to try some of the strategies contained. The really important thing to remember is that we are all learning all of the time. We need to be aware of our language choices but also seek feedback from those we are working with to enable us to meaningfully reflect on how we can improve. This is particularly the case with our cultural sensitivity and commitment to learning more about other cultural norms and values.

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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