



Communication and Language

Using a trauma informed care approach requires a shift in language and thinking. Often the behaviors and responses trauma survivors display are labelled in ways that view survivors as having something wrong with them. The language and communication approach we use is the basis for a meaningful relationship. Communication can open or close a door to uncovering the needs of the trauma survivor, and then their recovery.

In any communication, how we say something matters a great deal. The words and tone we use, how our statements and questions are phrased are seen as a way to judge if we can be trusted. We need to get it right.

1. Engage - create a connection

Engagement begins with the first encounter.

Greet the person by name and with a smile; let them know your occupation and what you will do to provide care. Welcome them, thank them for coming, or express some gratitude for their interest/participation/or willingness. This will help to build trust.

Example:

“Hi John, I am the receptionist here and I am here to get some information from you, which will help us to help you. I am so glad you came.”

2. Please show respect

Respect is vital in addressing anyone. You need it and so do others. It must be genuine and sincerely offered. We must see every person as a human being, just as we would like to be seen and heard.

Acknowledge nonverbal communication; some people communicate more through behavior than words. Over half of the verbal messages we send are communicated through our bodies—our bodies are pretty honest. So we can pick up body cues from the person we are serving and they can pick up cues from us. In the same way, silence is also a form of communication, giving a person time to feel comfortable or recognizing that some people can't speak about it or simply may need more time.

Be careful about labels, for example: “offender” or “perpetrator”, as sometimes those labels may describe a family member who is still loved even though they were the abuser. Be wary of assigning gender status to either a perpetrator or a victim as we know they can be both sexes.



3. Let's Listen

Listening is a first step in establishing trust and respect, good listening is actively seeking to understand.

Many needs are identified when we make sure we have heard what a survivor is telling us. If there is something you do not understand, or if you are confused by something you have heard ask for clarification.

4. Please don't confuse

Quite often when we work in an organization or a sector we have ways of talking and a vocabulary all our own. Those terms and acronyms can be confusing to people who work with you, now imagine how confusing they are to someone looking for help? When someone reaches out for help, a lot of emotions come to the surface: fear, anger, frustration, desperation, etc. We need to ensure that we are speaking so others understand.

- Use simple, everyday conversational language.
- Repeat explanations and ask the person to repeat back.
- Is English a second language? Is an interpreter required?
- Use appropriate language at the person's level of understanding.
- Avoid jargon.

Adapted with permission: Patient and Family Centred Care Resource Kit, Alberta Health Services; the Trauma-Informed Toolkit, Klinik Community Health Centre; the Trauma-Informed Practice Guide, BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Use Planning Council.

