

Trauma-Informed Communication Toolkit

Speak to be heard. Listen to understand. Support without harm.

Designed for: caregivers, support workers, advocates, professionals, and anyone working with trauma-impacted individuals.

1. Core Principles of Trauma-Informed Communication

- Safety – Communicate in a way that feels non-threatening and predictable.
- Trust – Be consistent, clear, and honest—even if you don’t have all the answers.
- Empowerment – Let the person lead where possible. Avoid talking over or “rescuing” them.
- Choice – Offer options, not ultimatums. Ask before giving advice.
- Collaboration – Work *with* not *on* the person. Ask what support looks like to them.

2. Language Swaps to Use

Instead of this...

Try this instead...

“Why didn’t you...”

“What would have helped in that moment?”

“Calm down”

“Would it help if we paused for a moment?”

“You need to...”

“Can I offer a suggestion?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s been happening for you?”

“It’s not that bad”

“That sounds incredibly tough—thank you for sharing it with me.”

3. Grounding Communication Techniques

- Use gentle tone + soft eye contact (not intense staring).
- Speak in short, calm sentences—trauma brains can struggle to process info.
- Offer check-ins, like:
 - “How is this feeling for you so far?”*
 - “Would you like to take a break or keep going?”*
- Silence is okay. It gives space to think, breathe, or feel.

4. Validate Without Fixing

- “That makes sense, given what you’ve been through.”
- “You’re not alone in this.”
- “It’s okay to feel this way.”
- “I’m here to support you, however that looks for you.”

5. Before You Speak: The SLOW Check-In

S – Safety: Is this environment emotionally safe for both of us?

L – Language: Am I using words they’ll understand and not misinterpret?

O – Ownership: Am I projecting my own agenda or emotions?

W – Window of Tolerance: Are they regulated enough to talk, or do we need a pause?

6. Situations to Be Extra Aware

- Disclosure of abuse, injury, or system failures
- Medical or assessment appointments
- High-stakes decisions (housing, parenting, legal)
- Emotional shutdown or hyper-arousal
- Being rushed or dismissed by professionals

7. Your Self-Check as a Communicator

Ask yourself after:

- **Did I give space for their voice?**
- **Did I listen without trying to fix?**
- **Did I leave them with more clarity or comfort than before?**