

Trauma-Informed Language

Say this, not that - without lowering expectations or avoiding accountability

Language can reduce threat without excusing harmful behavior.

Trauma-informed communication is not about finding perfect words. It is about reducing unnecessary threat, preserving dignity, increasing clarity, and keeping expectations understandable when someone is distressed

AVOID	TRY	WHY IT HELPS
"Calm down."	"I can see this is a lot. Let's slow this down."	Regulate before trying to reason.
"Why are you acting like this?"	"Something changed. What happened right before this?"	Move from judgment to observable context.
"You need to use your words."	"You can tell me, write it, point, or take a minute first."	Offer another path to communication.
"Stop being disrespectful."	"You can be upset. I still need us to speak without insults."	Hold the boundary without attacking identity.
"You know better."	"What got in the way of doing what you knew to do?"	Look for barriers, not just knowledge.
"There is nothing to be upset about."	"It makes sense that this feels big to you, even if I see it differently."	Validate experience without agreeing with every interpretation.
"If you keep this up, you're going to lose..."	"Here is what needs to happen next, and here are the choices you have."	Use clear contingencies, not escalating threats.
"What is wrong with you?"	"What do you need in order to get through this safely?"	Ask about need and next step, not defect.

Four Moves That Lower Threat

Simple shifts for difficult conversations

1. OBSERVE BEFORE YOU INTERPRET

“I noticed you got quiet when the plan changed.”

Instead of assigning motive, start with what you can actually see or hear.

2. REDUCE THE VERBAL LOAD

“Here is the one thing we need to solve first.”

Shorter language is often easier to process during activation.

3. OFFER REALISTIC CONTROL

“You can sit here or take two minutes by the door. Both are okay.”

Choice can reduce threat when the options are genuine and safe.

4. HOLD THE BOUNDARY WITHOUT SHAME

“I am going to help you through this, and I cannot let anyone get hurt.”

Safety and accountability do not require humiliation.

QUICK PHRASE BANK

“You do not have to solve everything right now.”

“Tell me what part feels hardest.”

“We can repair this when we are both steadier.”

“I can give you a minute and come back.”

“I want to understand before I respond.”

“You still have choices in what happens next.”