> "The words we use can either open a door or close one."
>
> FONDA J. ROYSTER



TRAUMA-INFORMED LANGUAGE GUIDE

Say It Right.

A practical language guide for professionals who work with vulnerable youth and survivors, written in plain language for the people doing the real work every day.

Youth Homelessness · Human Trafficking · Domestic Violence · Teen Dating Violence · Mental Health & Trauma · Foster Care



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10-PAGE GUIDE



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- 25+ years in social services advocacy

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YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

TEEN DATING VIOLENCE

MENTAL HEALTH & TRAUMA

FOSTER CARE

A NOTE FROM FONDA

Before you read a single tip in this guide, read this first.

I grew up as an unaccompanied youth. I experienced homelessness, abuse, and the kind of invisibility that happens when systems are not built to see you. And I can tell you: there were adults in my path who had good intentions. They *wanted* to help.

But the words they used, the questions they asked, the way they described what was happening to me: sometimes those words **made things worse.** Not because those adults were bad people, but because nobody had ever taught them how to speak to someone in crisis in a way that felt safe instead of shameful.

That is what this guide is for.

> **Language is not just about being politically correct** or following a rulebook. It is about creating enough safety for a young person or a survivor to stay in the room, keep talking, and actually receive the help you are trying to give them. When we get the words wrong, people shut down, walk away, or stop trusting the very systems that are supposed to protect them.

You do not have to be perfect. But you do have to be intentional. This guide will help you get there.

WHY IT MATTERS

Words Are Not Neutral

When we talk about vulnerable youth, survivors, and people in crisis, every word we choose sends a signal. It tells the person in front of us whether we see them as a problem to be managed or a human being to be supported. Here is what trauma-informed language actually does.

1

It keeps the person in the room

When someone feels **seen and not shamed**, they stay engaged. When they feel judged or labeled, they shut down, and you lose the opportunity to actually help them.

2

It builds trust faster

People who have been failed by systems before are **watching for signs that you are different.** Your words are often the very first signal they get, before your credentials, your title, or your intentions.

3

It separates the person from the situation

There is a profound difference between calling someone a **"homeless youth"** and calling them a **"young person experiencing homelessness."** One defines them by their circumstance. The other recognizes that the circumstance is something happening to them, not something they are.

4

It reduces retraumatization

Certain words and questions can trigger trauma responses in survivors. Knowing which ones to avoid, and what to use instead, is not optional. **It is a core professional skill.**

PRACTICAL REFERENCE

Say This, Not That

× DON'T SAY THIS	✓ SAY THIS INSTEAD
YOUTH HOMELESSNESS	
"Homeless kid" / "Runaway"	"Young person experiencing homelessness" / "Youth fleeing an unsafe environment"

Describing someone as homeless makes it their identity. Person-first language keeps their humanity at the center and positions their situation as something that can change.

"They chose to be on the streets"	"They are surviving in the best way they know how given their circumstances"

Language that implies choice ignores that most youth experiencing homelessness are responding to abuse, neglect, or systems that failed them.

TEEN DATING & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE	
"Why didn't they just leave?"	"Leaving is often the most dangerous time. How can we support their safety right now?"

This question shifts blame onto the person being harmed and ignores the complex web of fear, trauma bonding, and real danger that makes leaving incredibly difficult.

"Victim" / "Abusive relationship"	"Survivor" / "Relationship where violence occurred"

Survivor centers agency and resilience. Naming specific behaviors, rather than labeling the whole relationship, keeps the conversation grounded and less threatening.

"I can't believe you went back"	"I'm glad you're here. What do you need right now?"

Judgment at this moment destroys trust and may prevent them from reaching out again when they need help the most.

PRACTICAL REFERENCE, CONTINUED

Say This, Not That

× DON'T SAY THIS	✓ SAY THIS INSTEAD

MENTAL HEALTH & TRAUMA

"They are traumatized" / "They have trauma"	"They have experienced traumatic events" / "They may be having trauma responses"

Trauma is not a fixed identity. It is a set of responses to experiences. Keeping that distinction helps professionals see the person rather than a diagnosis.

"They are being dramatic" / "Overreacting"	"Their response makes complete sense given what they have been through"

Trauma responses are the nervous system doing exactly what it was trained to do to survive. They are not drama. They are data.

"Just get over it" / "Move on"	"Healing is not linear. What kind of support would be most helpful right now?"

Recovery from trauma takes time, is rarely straightforward, and looks different for every person. Telling someone to move on communicates their experience does not matter.

"Crazy" / "Unstable" / "Out of control"	"This person is struggling and needs support right now"

Labeling someone with words like crazy is dehumanizing, clinically meaningless, and often causes people to disengage from services entirely.

FOSTER CARE & CHILD WELFARE

"Foster kid" / "Orphan"	"Young person in foster care" / "Young person who has experienced foster care"

"Foster kid" turns a system status into an identity. Young people in foster care are not defined by where they sleep. They are defined by who they are.

"Their parents gave them up" / "They were taken away"	"They entered foster care" / "They were placed in foster care"

GENERAL PRINCIPLES · 1 OF 2

Eight Things to Keep in Mind Every Time

These principles apply in every conversation, regardless of topic, setting, or audience. They are not a checklist to run through mechanically. They are a mindset to carry into every room you walk into.

1

Lead with humanity before paperwork

Before you ask for a name, date of birth, or case number, make eye contact, introduce yourself, and ask how the person is doing. The relationship comes before the form.

2

Ask, don't assume

Every person's experience is different. Ask open-ended questions instead of assuming you know what someone has been through or what they need from you right now.

3

Believe them first

When someone shares an experience of abuse, trafficking, or violence, your first job is to believe them. Doubt communicates that they are not safe to be honest with you.

4

Explain what you are doing and why

People who have experienced trauma often feel out of control. Telling someone what you are about to do, before you do it, gives them a sense of agency that matters deeply.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES · 2 OF 2

Keep Going. Four More.

5 Give choices whenever you can

Even small choices, like sitting here or there, calling or texting, restore a sense of control that trauma has taken away. Choice is not a courtesy. It is a clinical tool.

6 Normalize their response

If someone is shaking, shutting down, or reacting strongly, say: "That response makes complete sense given what you've been through." Normalizing reduces shame immediately.

7 Never promise what you cannot deliver

Do not tell someone it is going to be okay if you do not know that. Do not promise confidentiality you cannot guarantee. Broken promises destroy the trust you are working to build.

8 Watch your body language

Crossed arms, checking your phone, looking at a screen: these send signals that you are not present. Trauma survivors read body language constantly. It was often their only safety signal.

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PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

This Is Not About Being Perfect. It Is About Being Intentional.

One of the biggest mistakes professionals make is overcorrecting. They become so worried about saying the wrong thing that they say **nothing at all**, or they become so scripted that they stop sounding human. Neither of those things serves the person in front of you.

The goal of trauma-informed language is not perfection. It is **intention.** Slowing down enough to ask yourself: Is this word centering this person's humanity? Is this question opening a door or closing one? Am I communicating that this person is safe with me?

When you get it wrong, and you will, because we all do, the best thing you can do is acknowledge it simply and move forward. You can say:

WHEN YOU GET IT WRONG, TRY THIS

"I don't think I said that the right way. What I mean is..."

That kind of honesty goes further than a flawless script. The young people and survivors you serve are not looking for a professional who has all the answers. They are looking for one who will **stay in the room, keep trying,** and treat them like a human being who matters.

PRINT & KEEP

Quick Reference Checklist

Use before, during, and after every conversation

BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

- [ ] Have I created a space that feels as **safe and private** as possible?
- [ ] Do I know enough to **avoid assumptions** about this person's situation?
- [ ] Am I ready to **listen more than I talk?**

DURING THE CONVERSATION

- [ ] Am I leading with **humanity before paperwork?**
- [ ] Am I using **person-first language** throughout?
- [ ] Am I offering **choices** where I can?
- [ ] Am I watching my **body language** and tone?
- [ ] Am I **believing them first** without judgment?
- [ ] Am I **normalizing their responses** instead of labeling them?

AFTER THE CONVERSATION

- [ ] Did I **follow through** on anything I said I would do?
- [ ] Do I need to **debrief** with a supervisor or peer?
- [ ] Is there anything I would do **differently next time?**

Print this page and keep it where you will actually see it: at your desk, in your notebook, or on the wall of your office.

THE WORK DOES NOT STOP HERE

Keep Going. Keep Growing.



This guide is a starting point, not a finish line. Language evolves, communities evolve, and our understanding of trauma-informed care continues to grow. **Commit to learning, stay humble, and keep showing up.**

Share this guide with a colleague. Bring it into your next team meeting. Post the checklist somewhere you will actually see it. And if you are ready to go deeper, for yourself or your entire organization, Fonda is ready to help.

Fonda J. Royster

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Where to turn for help

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

- **National Runaway Safeline**
  1-800-RUNAWAY · 24/7
- **True Colors United**
  truecolorsunited.org
- **OATL — Toledo, Ohio**
  oatltoledo.square.site

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

- **National Human Trafficking Hotline**
  1-888-373-7888 · Text HELP to 233733
- **Polaris Project**
  polarisproject.org

DATING & DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- **National DV Hotline**
  1-800-799-7233 · 24/7
- **loveisrespect.org**
  Text, call, or chat · 24/7

MENTAL HEALTH & CRISIS

- **Crisis Text Line**
  Text HOME to 741741 · Free, 24/7
- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**
  Call or text 988
- **SAMHSA National Helpline**
  1-800-662-4357 · Free & confidential

READY TO GO DEEPER?

Bring Fonda to Your Organization



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This guide is a starting point. The real transformation happens when Fonda is in the room with your team, your students, or your community, delivering presentations that are **honest, healing-centered, and grounded in real-world experience.**

BOOK A SPEAKING ENGAGEMENT

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Submit a Booking Inquiry

MORE FREE RESOURCES

Download More Guides

Visit the Resources page for topic guides on Youth Homelessness, Teen Dating Violence, Human Trafficking, and more, plus crisis hotlines and community connections.

fondaJroyster.com/resources