

Language Matters

**A Language Guide for
Centering Survivors &
Supporting Healing**



A Note from Our Executive Director

Dear Friends of DVRP,

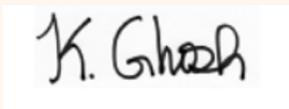
Since 1996, The Asian/Pacific Islander Domestic Violence Resource Project (DVRP) has provided services to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault in Washington DC, Maryland and Virginia.

We are excited to share our new guide, “[Language Matters: A Language Guide for Centering Survivors & Supporting Healing](#)” developed through a generous grant from the Mayor's Office on Asian & Pacific Islander Affairs.

DVRP's work uses an anti-racism, anti-oppressive lens which acknowledges the ways in which power and privilege of service providers can have an impact on service delivery and how it de-centers the autonomy of survivors. This guide is tool for service providers, community members including friends and family of survivors of gender-based violence to use a trauma informed lens in providing support to survivors and information on what survivor centered supports looks like.

We hope you will find it useful in your work and share with colleagues, friends and family. For more information on this guide and DVRP's work, please contact us at info@dvrp.org.

In Solidarity,



Krittika Ghosh

Executive Director

Asian/Pacific Islander Domestic Violence Resource Project

Our Intention

This guide serves as an introduction to **survivor-centered** and **trauma-informed** language.

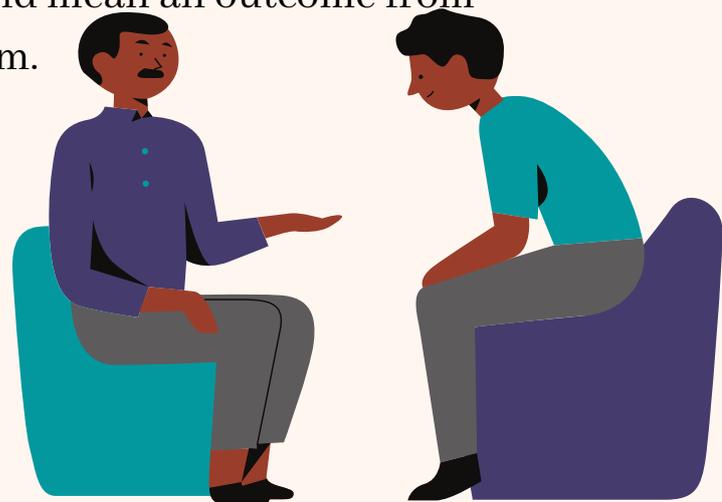
It is intended for service providers supporting survivors of violence to approach conversations and care modalities thoughtfully, by placing the survivor's needs and realities at the center.

We would like to highlight that this guide is not an exhaustive set of ways in which you can approach survivor-centered and trauma-informed practice through language. We invite you to consider that language can be perceived differently by different people, so, we ask you to use this guide only as a starting point in understanding how language helps in forming a relationship and providing meaningful support to survivors.

What does a survivor-centered approach mean?

A survivor-centered approach empowers survivors in reclaiming autonomy that has been taken away from them due to abuse. It places the survivor's needs, aspirations, and rights at the center, and gives survivors the power of making informed decisions.

For instance, a survivor-centered approach would allow the survivor to define what justice means to them, instead of automatically assuming that justice would mean an outcome from interacting with the criminal-legal system.



What does being trauma-informed mean?

To understand being trauma-informed, let's take a step back:

What is trauma and how can it come up for survivors?

Trauma is often understood as a normal emotional response to an extremely distressing event or a sustained series of events.

Trauma can manifest itself in many ways, it can come up as pain in the body, physical health ailments, anger, exhaustion, dissociation, etc.

Being trauma-informed, means understanding that an individual is more likely than not to have a history of trauma. It recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role trauma may play at an individual, communal, and generational level across the lifespan. **It asks the question "what happened to you?" instead of "what's wrong with you?"**

Learn more about Trauma-Informed Care:

- API GBV: [From the Roots of Trauma to the Flowering of Trauma-Informed Care](#)
- SAMHSA: [Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach](#)



Utilizing Survivor-Centered & Trauma-Informed Language

Affirm

When a survivor discloses the violence that they faced or talks about their trauma. Thank them for sharing and affirm their experience:

- "Thank you for sharing with me"
- "I believe you and it's not your fault"
- "What happened to you wasn't your fault"
- "What you're feeling is okay, and you have the right to express your feelings any way you feel is right"

Ask and Honor Consent

Asking for consent at the beginning and continually during the process of working with survivors is important; it fosters a culture of safety and re-affirms the power and autonomy of the survivor.

- "Would it be okay for us to talk about your temporary protection order?"
- "Is it okay for me to share your phone number with the new case worker?"
- "How do you feel about continuing to talk about....?"

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions ensure that the survivor is able to explain their narrative clearly. Some examples of open-ended questions are as follows:

- "How can I help you today?"
- "Can you help me understand...?"
- "How would you like things to be different...?"
- "How would you like us to help you with...?"

Note: Avoid asking "why" questions, ask "how" or "what" questions instead

Mirror Language

While working with an individual, mirror what they say about themselves. Mirroring language is a form of exemplifying empathy. Consider how they talk about their situation and utilize similar language while speaking of their situation or about themselves.

Offer Reflections

Reflections demonstrate that you are listening and understanding the survivor's situation. Some ways to offer reflections are as follows:

- “What I am hearing is...”
- “It sounds like...”
- "You're feeling because....."
- "I noticed you just"

Provide Affirmations

Maintain a culture where you also provide affirmations in areas where the survivor is showing resilience and growth. Affirmations help build rapport, demonstrate empathy, and affirms the survivor's decisions :

- “I appreciate you meeting with me today.”
- "Thank you for taking the time to go over the documents with me."
- “You have been incredibly resourceful in this situation.”

Provide Trigger Warnings and Content Warnings

Trigger and content warnings set the stage for when difficult or potentially triggering topics are discussed.

- Providing trigger warnings verbally can be as simple as saying:
 - “ Wanted to give you a trigger warning regarding..”
 - “Just wanted to let you know that we might be talking about things that trigger negative emotions...”
- We encourage you to follow this statement by offering survivors to care for themselves, take breaks, or remove themselves from the situation if needed.
- We also encourage you to plan breaks, have water and snacks available, while discussing difficult topics in which you anticipate survivors being triggered.

Key Considerations

Decenter Yourself

- While we may have our own goals and ideas of how a situation should be handled, that is not the priority.
- If you have a time sensitive question, first ask if it is okay to dive into the question before asking. Remember that asking and honoring consent is key within working with survivors.
 - For instance, if you are an attorney working on a U Visa Application and need some information from the survivor in a timely manner, ask, “is it okay for us to talk about your U Visa application right now?”
 - Additionally explain clearly what information you need and how it will be used.

Don't Make Assumptions

- Don't make assumptions about anything: ranging from the gender identity of the survivor to how the survivor would like support from you.
- It is also important for us not to assign value to someone's situation. Remember that only the survivor can determine how they feel about the trauma that they live with or the actions that they need to take.
 - For instance, don't say “That wasn't so bad” or “You should be grateful for what you have.”

Consider Power Dynamics

- As a service provider, we need to acknowledge the power and privilege associated with our roles, titles, and often institutionally-backed education.
- Understand that people are coming to you are often at their most vulnerable and are looking for support.
- In order to address the power dynamics, be transparent about your role and at what capacity you can help.
- Remind survivors that they have the agency and autonomy within the relationship that you foster with them.

Understand Your Social Location

- In addition to our power dynamics, it is also important to recognize and acknowledge that we bring in our own values, worldview, identities, cultures, and lived experiences with us within our work.
- *Ask yourself: how are you bringing yourself within the situation? How is it impacting your collaboration with the survivor?*

Set Clear Expectations

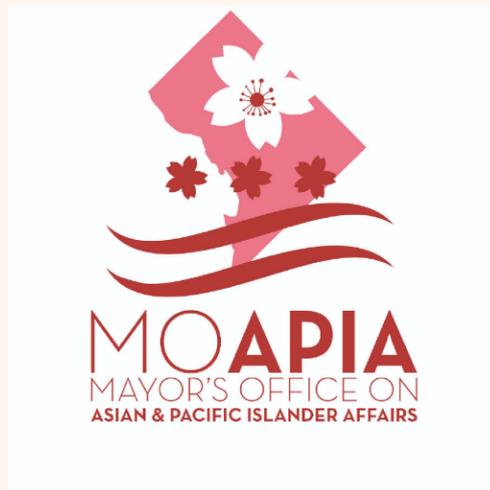
- Overall, set clear expectations of your role, be clear about how many times you will be meeting with them, the means by which you will be communicating, and how you are intending on helping them.
- Don't make any promises for outcomes.
- Within a session or a meeting, let them know how long the meeting is for and what you will be covering during the time together.

Practice Solidarity

- Remember that you are offering assistance as a collaborator in the care and wellbeing of the survivor.
- Remember that survivors are the experts in their own lives.

Acknowledgement

This toolkit was developed through generous funding from the Mayor's Office on Asian & Pacific Islander Affairs





Asian/Pacific Islander
Domestic Violence Resource Project

A/PI Domestic Violence Resource Project
PO Box 14268
Washington, DC 20044



Hotline: 202.833.2233
Email: info@dvrp.org
<https://www.dvrp.org>