

# **The Power of Language**

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Working with Relational and  
Developmental Trauma in  
Children and Adolescents



DR KAREN TREISMAN



Dr. Karen Treisman

## A Therapeutic Treasure box

for Working with Children and Adolescents with  
Developmental Trauma



*Positive Techniques  
and Activities*

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## A Treasure Box for CREATING TRAUMA- INFORMED ORGANIZATIONS

A Ready-to-Use Resource for Trauma,  
Adversity, and Culturally Informed,  
Infused and Responsive Systems

VOLUME 1

Dr. Karen Treisman

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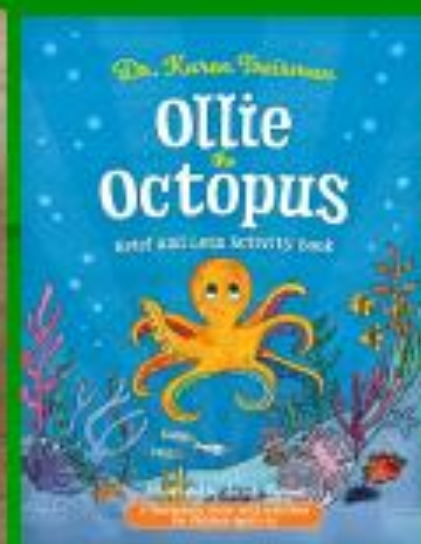
VOLUME 2

Dr. Karen Treisman



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WORDS CAN LEAD TO CREATING A THEM/US...

DISTANCING  
OTHERING  
BLAMING  
SHAMING

LANGUAGE CAN BE MUCH MORE THAN WORDS. TRAUMA IS A MULTI-SENSORY EXPERIENCE & BRAIN & BODY

# THE IMPACT OF WORDS AND POWER OF STORYING

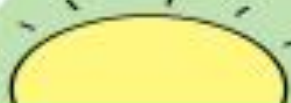
DR. KAREN TREISMAN  
SAFE HANDS, THINKING MINDS

WORDS CAN FOLLOW PEOPLE AROUND LIKE SHADOWS OR TATTOOS

WORDS CAN IMPACT SOMEONE'S SELF-ESTEEM, SELF-CONCEPT, & SELF-BELIEF. AS PEGGY OMARA SAYS "HOW WE TALK TO CHILDREN BECOMES THEIR INNER VOICE"



WORDS CAN BE RESTRICTIVE AND IMPIDE HOPE AND FUTURE THINKING



WORDS CAN BE POWERFUL  
THEY SHAPE OUR IMAGES, ATTITUDES, ASSOCIATIONS, EXPECTATIONS & ASSUMPTIONS

WORDS CAN REDUCE & SILENCE THE PROBLEM FIRST PERSON  
PEOPLE MAY HAVE FELT POWERLESS, SILENCED, & DONE TO...  
HOW ARE WE PRACTICING IN A WAY THAT DOESN'T REINFORCE & ADD TO THIS



WORDS CAN ALSO BE HOPEFUL, INSPIRING, UPLIFTING, MOTIVATING & MUCH MORE

WORDS CAN LEAD TO NEGATIVE SELF-TALK, LABELLING, INTERNALISED STIGMA & SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY



THE WAY WE SAY SOMETHING IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT WE SAY

TOUCH  
BODY LANGUAGE  
FACIAL EXPRESSIONS  
FEELINGS



WORDS CAN MAKE PEOPLE FEEL LIKE A NUMBER OR A TICK BOX



WORDS CAN HURT CAN PIERCE & STICK. WORDS CAN FEEL LIKE

(LIKE ACQUINITY & JAGGED)



WORDS CAN BE POWERFUL. THEY SHAPE REALITY. THE LENS WE LOOK THROUGH, OUR PERCEPTIONS, SENSATIONS & OUR FEELINGS

WORDS CAN LEAD TO A RANGE OF BIASES INCLUDING AUTHORITY & CONFIRMATION & ATTENTIONAL

WORDS CAN BE SOCIALLY, CULTURALLY & CONTEXTUALLY CONSTRUCTED



DR KAREN TREISMAN

SAFE HANDS  
THINKING  
FRIES

# THINKING ABOUT HOW WE USE & REFLECT ON LANGUAGE, STORYING & WORDS





**When a flower  
doesn't bloom  
you fix the  
environment  
in which it  
grows, not  
the flower.**

Alexander Den Heijer



# WORDS MAKE WORLDS

~DEBBIE MAH

WHAT WE SAY TO AND ABOUT A CHILD  
CHANGES HOW WE THINK ABOUT THEM  
AND HOW THEY THINK ABOUT THEMSELVES.

CHOOSE YOUR WORDS CAREFULLY.  
SPEAK KINDLY.

~KRISTIN WIENS~

@kwiens62









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# Narrative Therapy- David Denborough

**Article I. Everyone has the right to define their experiences and problems in their own words and terms.**

**Article II. Everyone has the right to have their life understood in the context of what they have been through and in the context of their relationships with others.**

**Article III. Everyone has the right to invite others who are important to them to be involved in the process of reclaiming their life from the effects of hardship.**

**Article IV. Everyone has the right not to have problems caused by trauma and injustice located inside them as if it were some deficit in them.**

**Article V. Everyone has the right to have their responses to hard times acknowledged. No one is a passive recipient of hardship. People always respond. People always protest injustice.**

**Article VI. Everyone has the right to have their skills and knowledge of survival respected, honored and acknowledged.**

**Article VII. Everyone has the right to know and experience that what they have learned through hard times can make a contribution to the lives of others in similar situations.**



JK 17

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When you enter this building

You are scientists



You are authors



You are important



You are leaders



You are explorers



You are readers



You are thinkers



You are creators



You are friends



You are loved



You are the reason we are here.

@sylvia duckworth



*I've learned that  
people will forget  
what you said,  
people will forget  
what you did,  
but people will  
never forget how  
you made them feel.*



*Maya Angelou*

## A People Place

by William J. Crocker

If this is not a place where tears are understood,  
Where do I go to cry?

If this is not a place where my spirits can take wing,  
Where do I go to fly?

If this is not a place where my questions can be asked,  
Where do I go to seek?

If this is not a place where my feelings can be heard,  
Where do I go to speak?

If this is not a place where you'll accept me as I am,  
Where can I go to be?

If this is not a place where I can try to learn and grow,  
Where can I be just me?

02/09/2021





## Cause I Ain't Got a Pencil

by Joshua T. Dickerson

I woke myself up  
Because we ain't got an alarm clock  
Dug in the dirty clothes basket,  
Cause ain't nobody washed my uniform  
Brushed my hair and teeth in the dark,  
Cause the lights ain't on  
Even got my baby sister ready,  
Cause my mama wasn't home.  
Got us both to school on time,  
To eat us a good breakfast.  
Then when I got to class the teacher fussed  
Cause I ain't got a pencil.

A child's behavior is NOT  
always what it seems

What we see: Behavior

What we don't see:  
What's under the surface



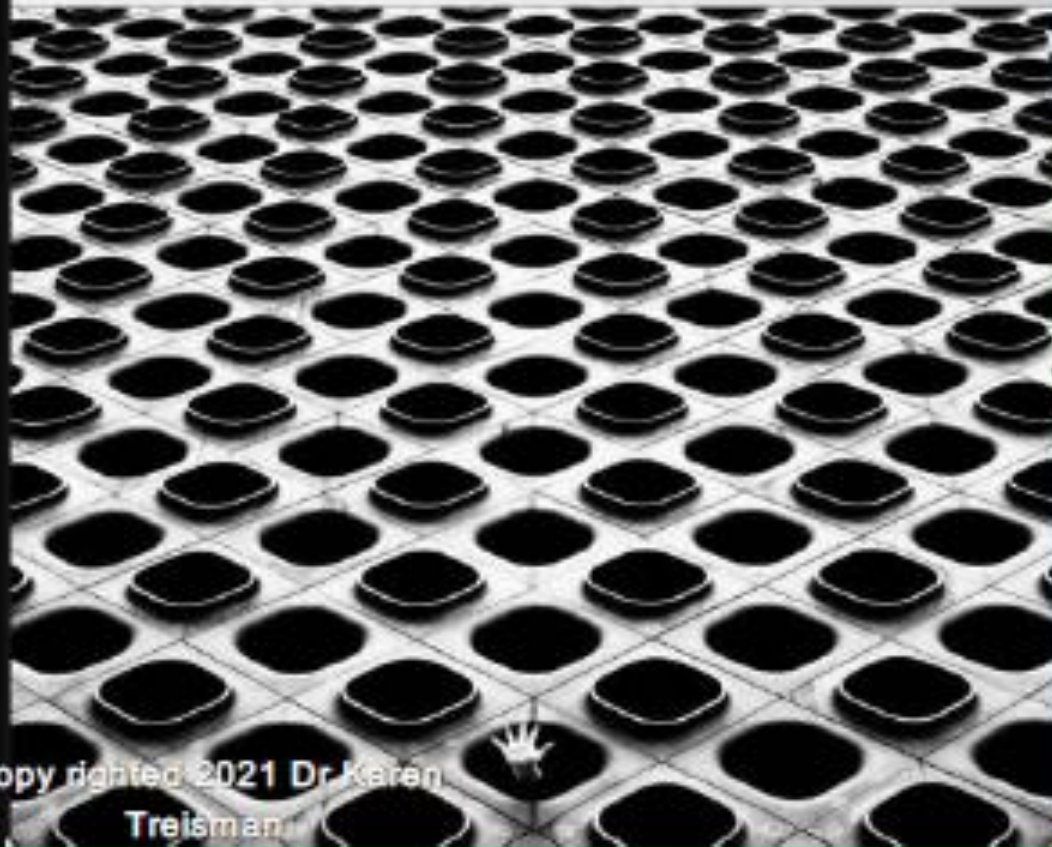
## Blinded

What did you see when you looked at me?  
Bandaged, broken, breaking down.  
Symptoms smothering, suffocating sound.  
Risk assessed, year on year  
Those boxes ticked,  
The plans you made  
The same each time  
Which I then went and disobeyed.  
Repeat offender, that was me,  
Revolving door, we all could see

Or Not!!

Textbooks teach many truths,  
They have their place.  
But I am me and you are you  
Did you not see?  
A hundred stories carved upon my skin  
Speak a truth I needed heard,  
But I'd been labelled to be understood  
And a heavy cost was incurred.

Not all is as it seems you know  
For me or you.  
Behind the walls and masks we wear  
We're all just human, we all know despair.  
Before you judge or label me  
Please make some space and truly see!



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Author: Lisa Morrison @LisaTMSA 2019



# Things to be mindful of...

- Flavor/ intro.
- Language is power- influence/ dominance/ shape/ silenced/ voiceless. Othering/ splitting/ jargon. “Sticks and stones will break your bones but words will never hurt you”.
- Free!!!
- How we talk to each other and ourselves- self-talk/ colleagues.
- Body & non verbal.
- Mixed with feeling- talk the talk.

**Not the same boat...**  
**No right or wrong e.g. "Survivor"/ "victim"/**  
**another choose of term. "Calm"/ "Sad" etc.**  
**Curiosity!**



WE ALL GO THROUGH  
THINGS DIFFERENTLY



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# Not visible/ not them & us

Walk  
GENTLY in  
the LIVES  
of others.  
Not all  
WOUNDS  
are VISIBLE.



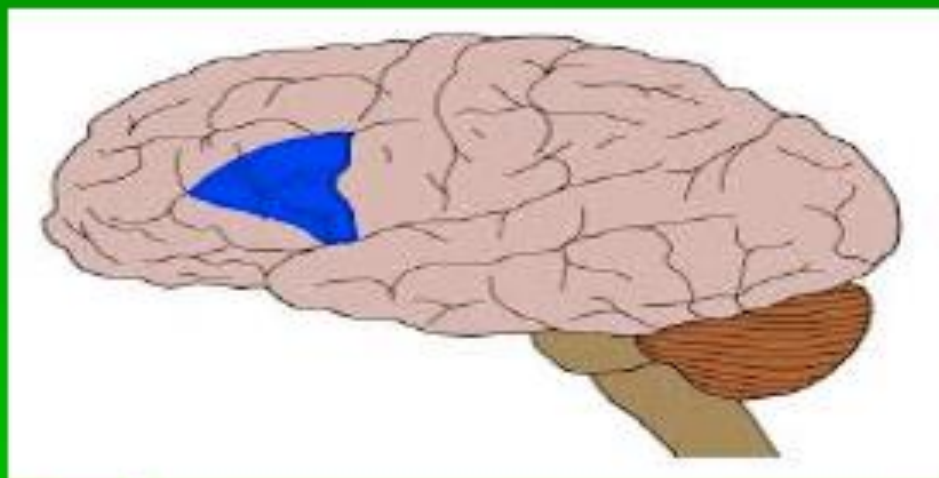




# Things to be mindful of...

- Tentative/ soften language.
- Hindsight- if I could go back...
- Frozen/ scared/ unsafe.
- Ok to say sorry/ relational repair/ human.
- Words change/ evolve.
- Cultural e.g. Gender/ race/ class etc.  
“Aggressive”/ accent/ “master” etc.
- Jargon free/ humanising.

# Additional factors(not an exhaustive list)



- Speech and language- 60% +.
- Broca's region.
- Emotion and recall.
- Child development.
- Emotional dictionary/ "anger"/ emotional poverty.
- Mute.
- Multi-mode e.g. In stress/ additional learning needs/ English as a second language/ those who haven't learned to read etc.



# Speech and language

- De Bellis (2009) researched children with a history of neglect & a history of experiencing domestic abuse=showed significantly lower scores on verbal fluency & overall receptive language capabilities than the control group.
- 33 mother-child dyads found that children with a history of neglect scored significantly lower on measures of syntactic ability & receptive vocabulary, including when age % maternal IQ were controlled for (Eigsti & Cicchetti, 2004).

# Speech and language

- Other studies echo this and indicate that trauma and adversity in childhood can increase generalised language difficulties; including difficulties with receptive and expressive language development, abstract communication skills, pragmatics (peer body language and non-verbal cues), increased difficulties with their internal state language (words to describe their feelings such as happy, sad, tired), and language processing (Westby, 2007; Zimmer et al., 2006; Sylvestre et al., 2010).



- At least 60% of young people accessing youth justice services, in the UK, have speech, language, & communication needs (Bryan et al., 2007, Gregory et al., 2011).
- The Bercow Report (2008) identified that at least 60% of the 7000 young people passing through Young Offender Institutions each year would have difficulties with speech, language, & communication, sufficient to affect the young person's ability to communicate with staff on a day-to-day basis.
- In Australia, 52% of young males who had been involved in offending behaviour and were on community orders were classified as having language difficulties (Snow & Powell, 2008), & more than 20% of females in prisons in the USA were found to have language difficulties (Sanger et al., 2001).
- The Prison Reform Trust' found that the evidence for communication difficulties in children within the criminal justice system added to their vulnerability in navigating the court system (Talbot et al., 2009). This can have huge implications from misunderstanding what instructions say, to understanding letters received, and legal advice and so forth.

# Speech and language

- Some studies have also indicated that trauma can decrease the activity in the broca's region (verbal production, speech centre, & language).
- Rauch et al (1996) conducted a PET scan study of people with a diagnosis of "PTSD" in which they were exposed to vivid & detailed narratives of their own traumatic experiences. During exposure to the script of their traumatic experiences people demonstrated heightened activity only in the right hemisphere, specifically, in the areas that are most involved in emotional arousal- the amygdala, insula, & the medial temporal lobe. During exposure to their traumatic scripts, there was also a significant decrease in activation of the left inferior frontal area, the Broca's area.



# Speech and language

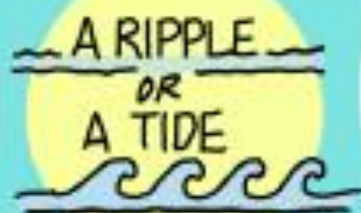
- Other research also discusses how language can become impacted during moments of fear, emotional dysregulation, & when trauma memories are activated. Carter et al (2012) found when undertaking the Adult Attachment Interview, that when people were asked about triggering & emotional material from their childhood; language difficulties were found including an increased number & length of pauses & reduced complexity of sentence structure. They also found people with a trauma history struggled more with their expressive language.



EXPANDING  
OR  
RESTRICTING



# EVERY MOMENT & INTERACTION CAN BE AN INTERVENTION



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# Gentle change

- Non shaming/ honoring/ distancing/ human/  
no right or wrong.
- Model the model- osmosis- lead by example.
- Training/ sessions. Benefits and ripples.
- Best practice examples.
- Examples in the past of changed words/ own  
children/ own childhood etc.
- What children/parents say?
- Offer alternatives.
- Plant seeds/ gentle- drip drip drip.



SEE A PERSON DIFFERENTLY  
& YOU SEE A DIFFERENT PERSON

SEE A SITUATION DIFFERENTLY  
& YOU SEE A DIFFERENT  
SITUATION

DR KAREN TREISMAN, SAFE HANDS THINKING MINDS  
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ADAPTED BY STUART SHANKLER

# One word...

- Bump/ smash
- Social distancing/ physical distancing



## Associations/ sensory...



- Ooze.
- Stab.
- Nits/lice.
- Puke/ vomit.
- Drug addict.
- Schizophrenia.
- Gang.

# Language in so many different forms



- Materials
- Websites
- Signs
- Brochures
- Letters
- Texts
- Men/  
behavior  
policy.



# Perspective take



- Team meeting.
- Notes/ Handovers.
- Files/ reports.
- To that person/ About a loved one/ about oneself.





REDACTED

# POWER OF LANGUAGE

- Smash/ bumped.
- Kim Kardashian story. Treat how you want to teach/ no not "attention-seeking"!
- Attentional and confirmation bias. Diagnostic overshadowing.
- Police and rape/ HIV linguistic labels.
- "Cut".
- Rosenhan et al/ "PD" story.

# Paradigm shift

- It is not what is wrong with you? It is what has happened to you/ to us/ to our organisation/ to our society?
- It is not what is wrong with you, it is what is strong with you?
- It is not what is the matter with you, it is what matters to you?
- “Challenging” behavior/ distressed



# Power of Language

- “He’s ADHD”.
- “She’s schizophrenic”.
- “Liar”/ “offender”/ “drug addict”/ “self-harmer”  
etc.
- The problem is the problem not the person  
(Michael White).
- “Naughty/ good”- behavior not person.
- Not master identity/ distance/ externalizing.
- “Anger management”/ your anger/the anger.

# Externalising Questions- Narrative Therapy

- Color/ shape/ animal/ creature/ type of weather/ thing/ something in nature etc.
- When did the “” first appear in your life? Was the “” around in your family? What purpose did “” serve for you back then? When was ... your friend/ your enemy?”, “In what ways did it/does “” help you? How does “” affect you/people around you/ life now?
- What does the “” stop you from doing/being/getting? It's cleverest trick or superpower? If “” left what would you miss? How have you managed to delay with conflict without the “”?



# Power of Language



- “She is always rude/  
“he is never on  
time”.
- “He’s hopeless”,  
“She is damaged”,  
“Just attention-  
seeking”, “Broken”,  
“Bad blood”,  
“Manipulative”,  
“resistant”, “brain  
damage”, “denies  
e.g. Self harm”.



# Power of language



- “CIN”/ “LAC”/ CIC”
- “CBT”/ “DV”/ “DNA”.
- “Contact”/ “placement”/ “case”/ “leaving care”/ “unborn”/ “hard to reach”/ “frontline”/ “reunification”/ “detached team” etc.
- Care review/ TACT/ Lemn Sissay & many others.
- “Hearing voices”.
- “Committed” suicide.
- Image by Yusuf Paul.

# Power of language



- Vague descriptors.
- “He’s aggressive/ rude/volatile”.
- “Unclean/ messy/ dirty”.
- “Mental health issues/ behavioral issues/ parenting issues”.
- “Learn to play/ more emotional warmth”
- “Sleep difficulties”.
- “Sexualized behavior”/ “self-harm”.



# Power of language



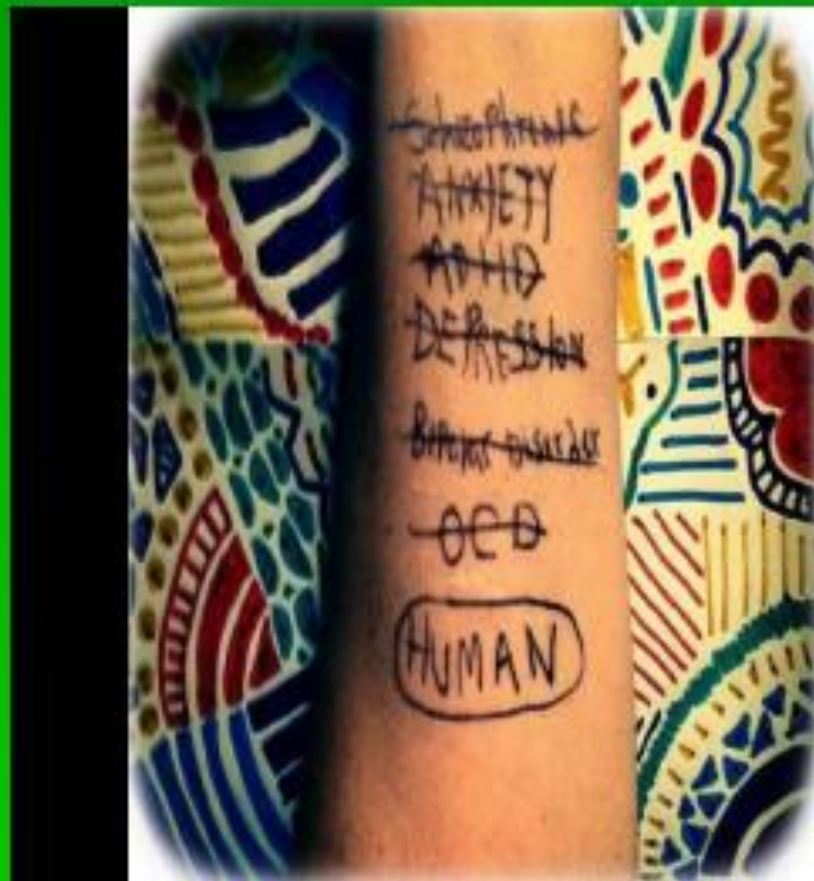
- “Safety”/ “love”/ “sad” etc.
- “I am glad you are here”.
- “At least”- Brene Brown.
- “I know exactly how you feel”.
- “We all...”.



# Victim blaming

- “She was asking for it”
- “Chaotic lifestyle”
- “Places themselves at risk”
- “Poor choices”
- “Her skirt...”
- “You were drinking”.
- Dr Jessica Taylor- Victim focus.

# Power of Language



- 1) Lead to self-fulfilling prophecies.
- 2) Contribute and reinforce a person's sense of hopelessness, negative self-esteem, and Internal Working Models.
- 3) Affect staff's responses, expectations, and styles which in turn can create a vicious cycle.
- 4) Place blame on the person, as opposed to thinking about the context and other variables.
- 5) Define a person purely by their behaviour.
- 6) Impede hope and block ideas to move forward.



# THE WORDS THAT SHAPED ME

words I've memorized



words I've tried to forget



words that hurt



words that healed



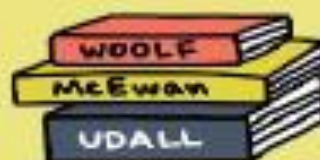
words I've screamed



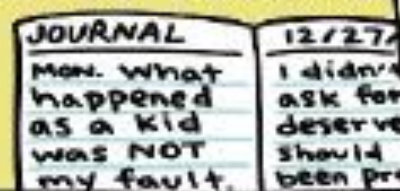
words I've whispered



words I've read



words I've dared to write



words I believed



words I rejected



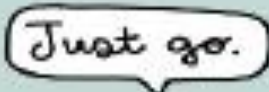
words that closed doors



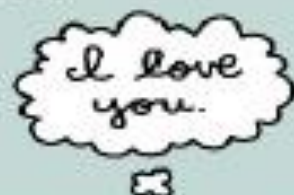
words that opened my eyes



words I shouldn't have said



words I left unsaid



Words are  
**POWERFUL.**  
(Choose wisely.)

@introvertdoodles





There is a  
voice that  
doesn't use  
words.  
Listen.  
-Rumi

a beautiful Mess inside <sup>tm</sup>

"The single biggest  
problem in communication is  
the illusion that it has taken  
place."

George Bernard Shaw

@hugobowden

# Language



A LADDER  
OUT OF MY  
CLOUDY MIND



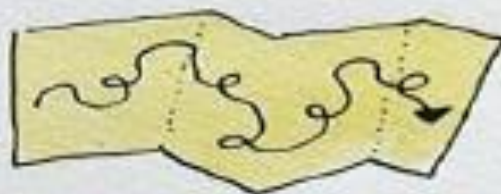
A DOOR OUT  
OF MY DAY



A GIFT TO  
MY MEMORY



AN IRON FOR  
MY WRINKLED  
HEART



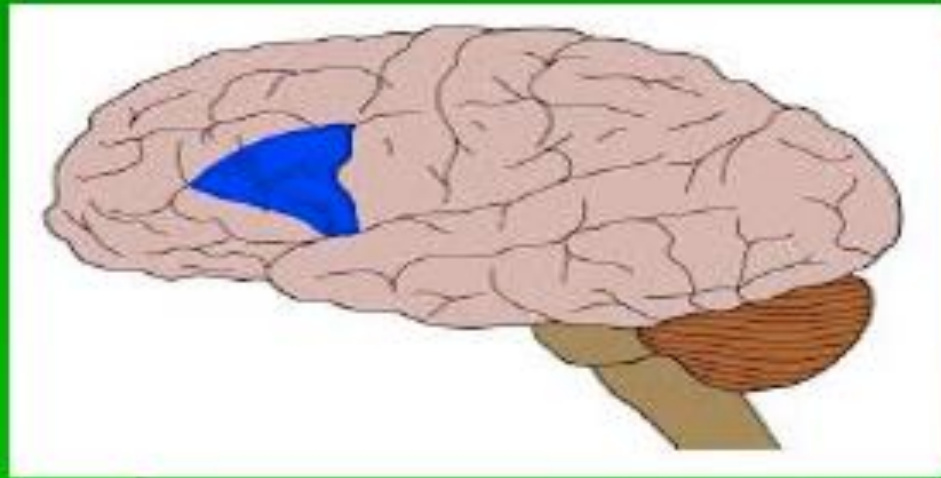
A MAP TO  
THE ABANDONED  
CORNERS OF MY  
SOUL



ALOE FOR  
A BURNED  
BRAIN



# Additional factors



- Interpreters
- Multi-mode e.g. In stress/ learning disabilities/ English as a second language/ those who haven't learned to read etc.



# Interpreters and Language

- Selection of interpreter.
- Expectations/ role definition.
- Consistency and reliability.
- Build rapport.
- Time considerations.
- First person narrative.
- Eye contact/ seating.
- Third relationship in the room-transference.
- Interpreter's unresolved issues of loss and trauma.
- Safe space
- Clear concise words.
- Less technical language.
- Visual and sensory cues.
- Body language/ facial expressions.

