

Language

This section explores commonly used terms and considerations around the language we use when working with survivors of domestic abuse.

The language we choose can either create a safe space for people to share their lived experience or can cause harm. Using language which demonstrates the wealth of knowledge and skills a person with lived experience brings, and which reflects how they relate to their experience, is powerful. We may see a hierarchy within language, particularly when naming collaborators. Have you noticed the order in which people with lived experience are listed? It often is the last, after professionals and practitioners.

For groups, we have developed an activity designed to support your group to develop its own preferred terms. See our [Language Activity](#).



“Language that is used about Domestic Abuse is predominantly negative and not enough strength based and seeing people with the skills and experience they have.”

SafeLives Pioneer

Strategic Language

These definitions are commonly used in Scotland’s strategic publications around trauma and lived experience engagement work. See: [Roadmap for Creating Trauma-Informed and Responsive Change: Guidance for Organisations, Systems and Workforces in Scotland](#).

Trauma-informed

Being trauma-informed means being able to recognise when someone may be affected by trauma and collaboratively adjusting how we work to take this into account and responding in a way that supports people’s resilience. The key principles underpinning trauma-informed practice, services and systems are safety, collaboration, trust, empowerment and choice.

Power sharing

Power sharing is about collaboratively developing routine, safe and meaningful processes so that those of us who are affected by trauma are, when we wish to be, involved in decision making about how services and systems are designed and delivered. A trauma-informed and responsive organisation values and encourages a variety of knowledge and insight – such as knowledge gained through our own lived or living experience of trauma and that gained through our training and roles, as workers, experts, and leaders – and ensures that leaders, staff and people with lived experience of trauma have a seat at the table during decision making. It is also important to note that many people will inhabit more than one of these areas of expertise.

Commonly Used Terms

We’ve provided some commonly used terms across the VAWG and trauma sectors in Scotland and more generally. We have suggested considerations on why some people may associate with certain terms relating to experiences of VAWG and trauma, and why others might not. These are not exhaustive and the terms a person chooses to use about themselves, and their experiences are individual. The use of terms and their meaning can change over time.

Victim

This term is often used by professionals rather than by people who have experienced VAWG. It is especially common when referring to the criminal justice system, and this can be a barrier to understanding for some people who have not been involved in this. Some prefer this term as it describes the impact of being victimised by a person and acknowledges the resulting trauma. It also recognises that some people die as a result of domestic abuse and therefore do not survive.

Consider:

- Some might dislike that this term can carry a connotation of being ‘weak’ and being defined by what the perpetrator has done.

Survivor

This term is often used to refer to people who are actively responding to their experience, either as it happens, or afterwards. Some people talk about a journey from 'victim' to 'survivor', which may then continue to other terms. This can feel like a celebration of the strengths a person has used to survive.

Consider:

- Not everyone survives domestic abuse. There can be a suggestion that the experience is in the past, and this does not apply to people who are experiencing abuse, or experiencing the impact of abuse, now.

Expert by Experience

This term speaks to the expertise, insight, and knowledge of VAWG and trauma that a person brings and can help to demonstrate the redistribution of power from professionals as the experts, to one of shared expertise. This can be considered a reflection of the strengths a person has used and developed from their experience.

Consider:

- Some people feel uncomfortable with use of the term 'expert', especially in relation to VAWG. People are experts in their own experience and shouldn't be expected to be experts in every element of VAWG.

Lived Experience

This term refers to knowledge about VAWG and trauma and other intersecting experiences gained through living through it. This allows individuals space to define how they relate to their experiences. It can provide more room for understanding the intersection of VAWG with other oppressions and privileges as part of our wider lived experience.

Consider:

- Some people feel that when professionals use this it becomes their identity to the professional, rather than seeing them as whole, complex people.

Perpetrator

One of the most common terms used to refer to a person or persons who carries out violent and/or abusive behaviour. It can locate responsibility with the person causing harm, especially when we refer to 'those perpetrating abuse'.

Consider:

- Some people may feel uncomfortable in using this term, especially in relation to someone they love.

Other terms and the connotations around these:

Service User

This term is generally used by professionals to refer to people accessing services and is commonly used in public/statutory services and organisations. It has no individuality and has connotations of services doing something 'to' a person. People with lived experience do not generally refer to themselves as 'service users'.

Vulnerable

There can be a misconception that domestic abuse only impacts people who are in some way inherently 'vulnerable'. It entrenches the rhetoric of 'them and us', whereby people can feel that they would never experience domestic abuse because they are not vulnerable. It comes from a place of deficit and can deskill people who have shown strength and creativity to keep themselves and their families safe from the actions of a person, or persons, who have caused them harm.

Resilience

Use of 'resilience' can place the onus on the person with lived experience rather than placing the responsibility for abuse with the person who has caused harm. It can create a feeling that by showing how abuse has impacted on them, they are not resilient.

Lessons Learned

Often used following fatal domestic abuse or following serious incidents. 'Lessons learned' does not tend to be used around new knowledge; it often refers to knowledge that people with lived experience, and domestic abuse professionals, have been sharing for a long time.

Speaking with people with lived experience of domestic abuse

In addition to being thoughtful in our language, it is also important to be mindful of how we say things. These are some thoughts from survivors about what not to do when engaging with someone with lived experience of domestic abuse. It is not an exhaustive list and does not replace building a relationship with individuals and learning their preferences.

Some tips from the Authentic Voice Panel & SafeLives Pioneers:

- Don't feel sorry for me
- Don't patronise me
- Don't wrap your arms around me – I am not broken
- Don't other or infantilise me
- Don't mistake a lack of coherence with a lack of credibility – trauma impacts how someone processes and shares their experiences

In addition to the individual preferences of someone with lived experience, we also provide further guidance on accessibility in our Equity, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion guidance later in this section

How you talk about domestic abuse generally

How often do you consider the presence of survivors in the room when you talk about domestic abuse?

We strongly believe that there should be no 'them and us' in our response to domestic abuse. The way some professionals speak about domestic abuse can embed the mentality that domestic abuse doesn't happen to professionals; it happens to 'them'.

At times, we can also fall into a habit of discussing domestic abuse in a way that can be traumatising for survivors. Consider why you are sharing details of domestic abuse – is it necessary to be detailed or graphic? Would you describe the situation like this to the survivor themselves?

Vicarious Trauma

“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”

Rachel Naomi Remen

Sometimes where there is no means to effectively debrief, we can find ourselves offloading in an unsafe way on those around us; for example, sharing overly detailed stories of trauma we have been confronted with either personally, or from others. This can be both a symptom of vicarious trauma in ourselves, and a cause (or means to exacerbate) of vicarious trauma in those around us.

In addition to being mindful of how your words can impact on survivors, be aware of how they can impact on others around you. Vicarious trauma can be a risk when working with domestic abuse; regular clinical supervision, debriefs and vicarious trauma training can be beneficial.

Considerations for Survivors

Authentic Voice is about survivors making an informed decision to share what they want, when they want, and with whom they want.

It is also important for groups of survivors to create boundaries around what they feel able to hear of other survivors' experiences. We find that often survivors will ask not to hear details of their peers' stories, so it is helpful to build in agreements around this, regular check ins and reiterating the choices survivors have made about what they participate in.

Language Activity

Summary

This is a practical template of an activity to support groups to develop the language they feel comfortable with which represents the purpose of the group and the role of each individual. An agreed language sheet should be created and shared with any external visitors before they attend so they are clear on terms and words they should/should not use to describe the group's members and activity.

1 Discussion: Words

Words mean different things to different people. As words are the most common used method of communication within our culture, we can often speak automatically and unconsciously. This activity is a moment to stop and think about the power some words have for positive or negative and agree some terms we are comfortable with.

Co-create a group agreement, which covers how the group will work together, including how to manage conflicts of opinion. Consider how to create space for people to respectfully hold opinions, without being offensive to one another.

Re-visit this group agreement before the next part of this activity. Acknowledge that there will be some difference of opinion in the room. Ask the group to agree a way to challenge in a safe way.

2 Activity: Lay out a number of different words and phrases either on the floor or on a table for the group to review – two facilitation options are suggested below

Lay out a number of different words and terms used to describe people with lived experience of VAWG and trauma, words to describe gender, words to describe families, words to describe professionals etc. Please pick up any words that stand out either as something you are comfortable with or a word you don't like/don't relate to.

- **Option one:** Group facilitator hold up each of the words. Ask the group to indicate with thumbs up, thumbs down or in-between if they do not have a strong feel either way.
- **Option two:** Ask the group to order the words across the room. One end of the room "Happy with this word" the other side "Please don't use this word"

For either option ask the group to discuss the way they feel about different words. Consider how you will respond if there is only one person strongly advocating for or against specific terms – how can you as a facilitator make space for this?

3 Discuss: How does this word make you think/feel/respond?

Groups can develop an agreed language that all are comfortable with. This may require some follow up discussions and agreed language should be regularly reviewed as the group evolves.