

Power of Language

MASOC Lunch n' Learn April 21, 2026

Presented by Melissa Santoro, LICSW

Co-founder, Pathway to Resilience, LLC

www.pathwaytoresilienceri.com

1

Welcome &
Expectations

2

About Me

Melissa Santoro, LICSW (she/her)

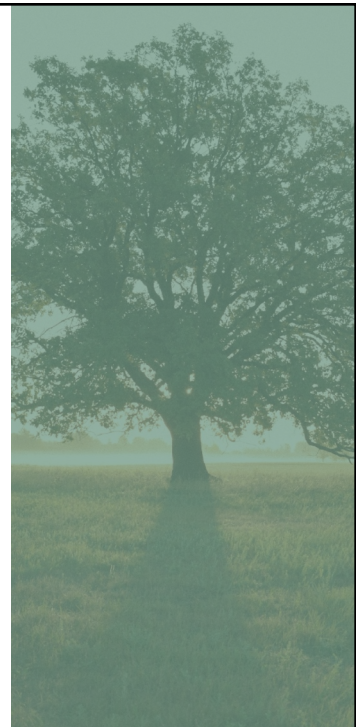
- LICSW since 2006
- Specialized in providing sexual abuse specific treatment, training and clinical supervision
- Has held many leadership positions for non-profit agencies, focusing on outpatient services for children, teens and adults impacted by trauma.
- Career work supporting families formed through adoption, providing education and support to adoptive parents and professionals, and working with homeless youth as a part of an independent living program



3

Co-Founders of Pathway to Resilience LLC www.PathwaytoResilienceRI.com

With several decades of combined expertise in trauma specific treatment, Linzi Rae Matta, LICSW & Melissa Santoro, LICSW, are co founders of *Pathway to Resilience LLC- Experts in Trauma Treatment Consultation & Training*. They believe that engaging in high quality training and consultation, specific to topics regarding trauma informed and best practices, helps reduce risk and liability associated with providing mental health services. Through trauma treatment consultation and training, they offer knowledge and expertise on successful trauma informed practice interventions, as well as expert insight, ideas and support for client care specific to trauma treatment needs, including but not limited to childhood sexual and physical abuse, sexual exploitation and domestic violence.



4



5

What to Expect


In this workshop, attendees will increase awareness of the power of language as it pertains to clinical documentation and learn concrete ways to change their word choices and utilize trauma informed language.

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025



6

Learning Objectives



- Participants will increase their knowledge about the core concepts of trauma informed care & language.
- Participants will increase their awareness regarding power of language with clinical documentation.
- Participants will learn at least 2 new ways to utilize trauma informed language choices.

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

7



Trauma Informed Care Principles

- Safety
- Collaboration
- Trustworthiness & Transparency
- Voice & Choice
- Peer Support
- Cultural, Historic & Gender Issues

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

8

Trauma Informed Care



- Trauma-Informed Care is partially about understanding the symptomology, but is also about ensuring that the core principles are infused into your language, daily work, environment, and relationships.
- Written word and clinical documentation are areas that need to infuse this approach.



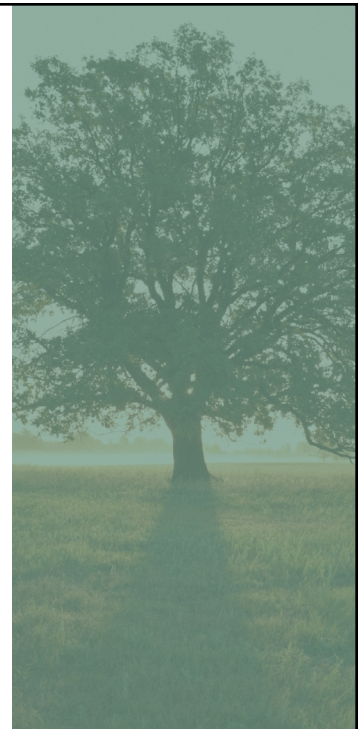
~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

9

Power of Language and Trauma Treatment

-  There are certain concepts in the English language, such as the basics of grammar, that also influence how we write.
-  We need to be mindful of how we use certain grammatical principles in our writing. Examples: Possessive pronouns; Adjectives; & Prepositions

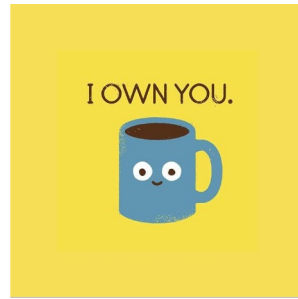
~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025



10

Possessive Pronouns

- “His Car”
- “Her coffee”
- “Their book”



Grammatical Principles

Adjectives

- “Please hand me the blue paper.”
- “I’ll buy the red dress.”

Prepositions

- “The man on the platform.”
- “There is some milk in the fridge.”

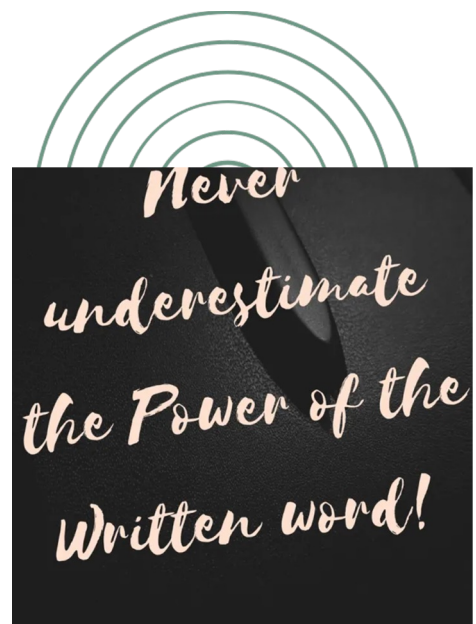


~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

11

Grammar Basics & Clinical Documentation

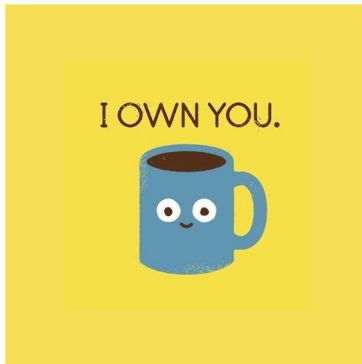
Knowing the “purpose” of the grammar basics, i.e. possessive pronouns, let’s explore how they apply to our clinical documentation.



~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

12

Grammatical Principles- Possessive Pronouns



“His victim.”

“Her abuser.”

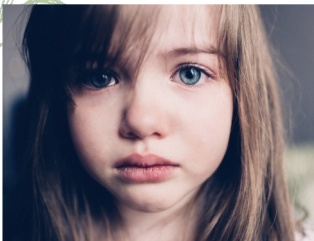
“Their perpetrator.”

“My client.”

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

13

Grammatical Principles- Adjectives



“We provide services to
traumatized children.”

“I provide treatment to sexually
abused children.”

“Our program serves trafficked
youth.”

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

14

Grammatical Principles- Prepositions

“The child was in a sexual relationship with him.”

“She engaged in sexual acts with her father.”

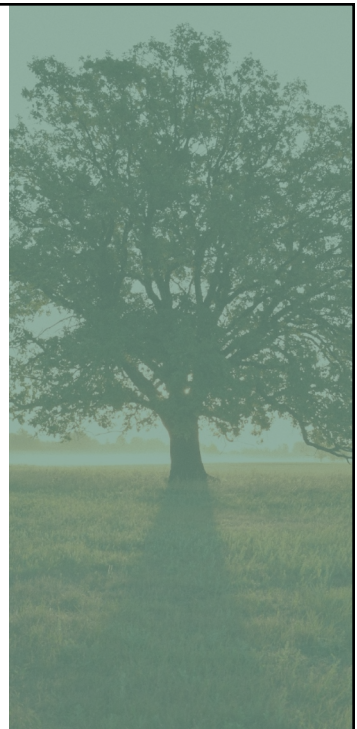
~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

15

Reword!




- 🌿 “His victim”
- 🌿 “Her abuser”
- 🌿 “My client”
- 🌿 “We provide services to traumatized children.”
- 🌿 “The child was in a sexual relationship with him.”

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

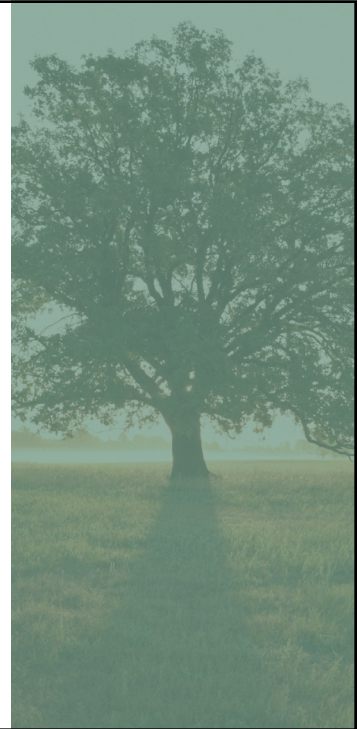


16

Person First Language



- 
 Its best to use person first language. There are many terms we use in this field that are simply pejorative labels, such as “abuser”, “sex offender”, “drug addict” or “perpetrator.”
- 
 These terms are used to label the person and would likely not be considered “trauma-informed.”
- 
 The alternative would be to describe the behavior and not the person.

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

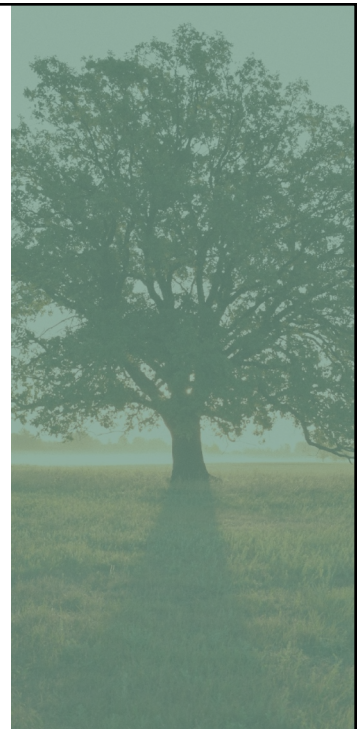


17

“Language Matters”

- 
 Using a term like “sex offender” is about *who the person is* rather than *what they have done*. Where it is acceptable for someone to feel bad about *what they have done*, feeling bad about *who one is* makes positive change more difficult to achieve.
- 
 It is more useful – and likely more effective - to label behaviors and not people. For that reason, it is recommended to use “person-first” language. After all, most people will be more successful at changing their behavior rather than their identity.

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025



18






Person First Language


<p>Rather than labeling the behavior:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Sex Offender  Juvenile Sex Offender 	<p>Use person first language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">  Adult who sexually abused  Youth with problematic sexual behaviors
--	---

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

19

“Victim vs. Survivor”

-  Our language also matters in describing those who have experienced sexual abuse and assault. Using the words “Victim” or “Survivor” can be tricky.
-  The word “Victim” can be seen as disrespectful to those who have worked to process the sexual abuse. And the word “Survivor” could also be disrespectful. It is sometimes the case that some people don’t survive sexual violence/abuse.
-  It is important to understand that depending on where people are in their journey, they may prefer different references to their experiences.



~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

20

“Touched him inappropriately”

“Child Prostitute”

“Overcoming trauma”

“Allegedly vs. Reportedly”

“Case vs. Client/Service Recipient”

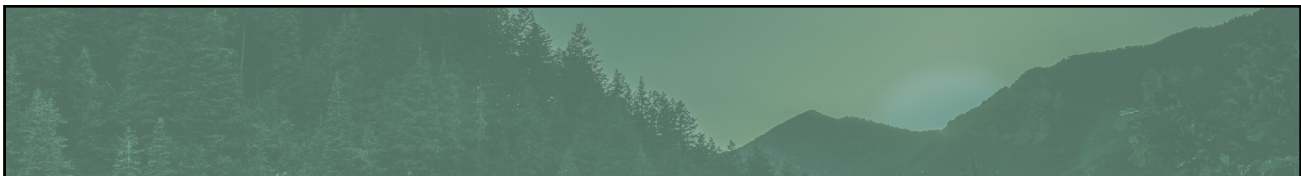
“Foster/Adoptive Child/Family”

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025




Other Word Choices



21





In General

-  When writing, we have a responsibility to attend to the emotional impact of our language and our word choices. This includes taking a trauma informed approach to language.
-  How we describe someone’s choices and actions often reflects our judgement of them as a person. Your writing should convey respect for people’s decisions, as well as an awareness of the possibility that trauma might have impacted those decisions.
-  Be humble.

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

22






In General

-  Non-objectifying language does not define people solely by one of their experiences or characteristics.
-  We must be careful when we talk about the impacts on people due to trauma, poverty, oppression, etc. as we should not overgeneralize. Things that we know are true, for some of us, some of the time, are not necessarily true for all of us, all of the time.

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

23

Tips from an attorney

-  Picture your notes and other documentation on a screen in a court of law or in front of the Board of Licensing. Grammar/spelling errors reflect poorly on you; makes your documentation less persuasive/believable. Don't leave boxes blank on a document, select/write in N/A.
-  If it isn't documented, it didn't happen. A Board/Jury might conclude failure to document equals the event didn't occur.
-  Avoid defamation of character. Document clearly who reported the info to you.
-  Avoid abbreviations unless you are using an approved list.
-  Be very mindful of accurate dates. Do not document events before they occur. Complete notes in a timely manner.

One error could taint the entire record.

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025



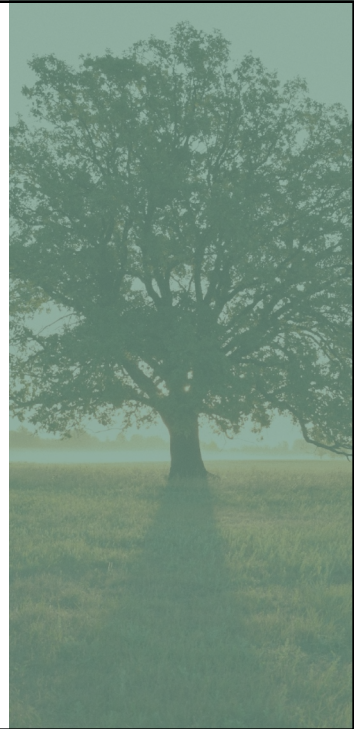
24

Always Remember

- Write as if the client is reading over your shoulder.
- Clients can have access to their records at any time, even if they were a minor and are now an adult. Be mindful of what they will read about themselves.
- How you write is as important as what you say.

WORDS: SO INNOCENT AND POWERLESS AS THEY ARE, AS STANDING IN A DICTIONARY, HOW POTENT FOR GOOD AND EVIL THEY BECOME IN THE HANDS OF ONE WHO KNOWS HOW TO COMBINE THEM. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025



25

How to Honor Trauma Informed Care Principles in Clinical Documentation

- Safety
- Trustworthiness & Transparency
- Peer Support
- Collaboration
- Voice & Choice
- Cultural, Historic & Gender Issues

~Prepared by Pathway to Resilience, LLC- 2025

26



27



Thank You

pathwaytoresilienceri@gmail.com




www.pathwaytoresilienceri.com




28

References

 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.

 www.AlamedaCountyTraumaInformedCare.org

 Beyond Manuals and Workbooks: Improving Clinical Outcomes with Adolescents Who Have Sexually Abused, D. Prescott 2012

29

References

 *"How you write is as important as what you say: A guide to trauma-informed writing"*; National Center on Domestic Violence, Trauma & Mental Health. August 2014 www.nationalcenterdvtraumamh.org

 *The Trauma Informed Tool Kit*. Kline Community Healthcare. Second Edition, 2013. <http://kline.mb.ca/education-training/training-opportunities/trauma-informed/>

30