



'living with a relative'

*'things are pulling them
to other places'*

*'finds it hard
to connect'*

Child Protection and
Family Support Services

Language Practice Guide

*'the young person
has said...'* →

This guide has been produced to aid a refresh of our language, to build upon the practice discussions we have held across our service in relation to the importance of language. This includes how we relate to each other, our partners and the children, young people and families that we work alongside.

This guidance will evolve as time progresses and it is the start of our journey in relation to reflecting on our use of language and how we can continue to ensure that we promote connection and relational working – of which language is the foundation.

This guidance can be used to promote continued reflection of our practice. A key part of this is exploring why we may use certain terms over others, and how we can encourage connection and relational working in terms of the conversations we hold and the records we keep.

The power of language

The families we work alongside have experienced and are experiencing trauma. They are often living in the context of relational and emotional poverty. Connection and relationships are the biggest protectors to aid the recovery from trauma. However, to adults and children who have experienced trauma, they are often the biggest threat, as they have often been living in or continue to live within environments where hyper-vigilance and other survival mechanisms are in place to protect themselves.

It remains that adults and children that have experienced trauma long to be understood, heard and have positive relationships. However, these can be the most terrifying as they often do not feel worthy of this. They may have not had any positive relationships before, so they are mistrustful of peoples' motives. They can be terrified and unsure how to relate, so build strategies to avoid it and to avoid being hurt further.

Our language aids the building blocks for aiding connection and relationships. Language is powerful and is a part of everyone's life. Often people who have experienced trauma, particularly when this has involved significant figures in their lives often internalise these experiences as occurring due to them being flawed in some way. With this in mind, our approach has the power to reinforce this view and add to feelings of shame or the power to aid healing and recovery.

In addition we need to acknowledge the power we hold when entering into children, young people and families lives and look at ways in which we can seek to empower and enable a surfacing of this power so it is more equal. Our families have experienced oppression and abuse which has often involved control. In addition to this, very often they are receiving services from a non-voluntary perspective which reinforces these previous experiences. We can seek to distribute power more equally when we come together with our learnt and lived experiences and seek to honour children, young people and families for their strengths and to view them as a 'whole' person.

Our systems and processes often create language of their own. This can be helpful and focus help and support, but it can also further reinforce shame, blame and oppression experienced by the families and young people we are seeking to help and support. We can become focussed on certain aspects of their life that dominate our thinking and can lead us not to explore the whole person. When shame and blame are reinforced, the likelihood of building meaningful relationships that seek to make a difference is reduced.

When we enter the lives of children and families, we aim to build connection, create relationships and foster environments that influence positive change. However, the language we use is the foundation for this approach. We can often use language that is negative, impersonal and can be harmful. We can often use words or phrases due to culture, speed, stress, feeling vulnerable, anxious, external influences, pride and fear.

We need to continuously be aware of our language including what is said and un-said through our body language and how we can promote connection that reduces shame.

We are often faced with making difficult decisions that often involve taking actions to protect children. Whilst these actions are often necessary, we can still ensure that our interactions even in difficult circumstances, are held with compassion and humility. During these times we can often be influenced by our own emotions and it is important that these are acknowledged and attention paid to our tone, use of words and how we can continue to stay regulated and calm.

As a service, we are holding ourselves accountable to reflecting on our language and approaches and ensuring that we continue to strive to ensure our language and interactions are underpinned by empathy, compassion, positive regard and honouring the person as a whole being.

It is important to remain curious as to the person's lived experience and how they make sense of their world in addition to triangulating that information with observations and different perspectives. We are paying attention to our language to ensure that this is reflective of our value base as a service. This involves reflecting on the language we use every day, with each other and the families, children and young people we work alongside. We seek to ensure that we are changing our language and aiding each other on this journey by being critical friends to one another.

We acknowledge that language is a powerful tool at our frequent disposal and the words we use and the values we promote have the power to influence and improve the experience of everyone we work alongside.

This guidance has been developed to build on our values and why we all enter into our role of supporting others and making a difference. It offers some principles to think about and some words and phrases many of us use every day with some suggestions as to what we could say instead to reflect the delivery of support that decreases shame, blame and harm.

This is the start of a journey in relation to our language and we will all continue to build on these principles as our journey progresses.

Language is vast and evolving, the words we use, and terminology can mean different things to different people in different circumstances and at different points in time. We need to continue to reflect, adapt and evolve, ensuring we remain open and honest and that we consider the imprint we leave on others.

Within this guidance we will consider some words and phrases that are commonly used in children's services for us to rethink new ways of communicating that promote relationships and connection.

Below are some guiding principles to consider in all forms of communication that can aid us to think about our current practice and build positive change:

- Be aware of all forms of communication (not just words), recognising that many adults/children we work alongside have developed skills to protect themselves which mean they can interpret tone of voice, eye contact, facial expressions and body language differently.
- How can we foster compassion as this can make difficult experiences more bearable – and acts as a bridge to build connection.
- Showing compassion also aids self-compassion to grow;
- Be aware of the learning needs of families and children/young people including using different forms of communication – visual aids or games for example.
- Be curious in relation to the language the child, young person or adult prefers – are there any words that they dislike.
- How does the child/young person/family wish to receive feedback.
- How can we best help – what is needed from us.
- Use first person language – humanising language which sees the person first not the situation/behaviour.
- How can we use our authority to support the person to make changes.
- Acknowledging that the person holds power and that it is our role to aid them to realise their power and empower them to make change.
- Where possible, try and give the person the opportunity to ask how they wish to be referred or how they wish their experience to be framed – for example a person’s mental health diagnosis and their relationship with this, or considering themselves as a survivor rather than a victim – or referring to lived experience;
- Be mindful of how they wish to be addressed in meetings – for example the use of ‘mum’ ‘dad’ when professionals are referred to by their name can reinforce power.
- Ensure that a balanced perspective of the situation is explored, including strengths, skills and aspirations that can be built on to promote change – what is unique about the person and their family.
- When talking about birth families to children and young people, provide a balanced narrative and honour the role and value they have in the child/young person’s life.

remember that
as professionals
we can alter the
trajectory of a
families' situation
by our own
preconceptions
and confirmation
bias.

- Avoid definitive or restrictive terms such as, ‘must not’, ‘always’, ‘never’ – this limits choice and adds to power imbalances.
- Avoid the use of jargon.
- Consider the use of abbreviations and their meaning – both now and in the future.

- Consider contextual and intersectional factors such as age, gender, culture, race, ability/disability – including historical context.
- When writing about the behaviours, focus on the behaviour not the person– and what the behaviour is telling us that the person may not have the words to express.
- Consider the drivers for the behaviour – a strategy which people often employ at times of stress which may have worked for them before or has aided them to cope. What are they trying to receive from their behaviour that they may not be able to ask for?
- If a young person returned in the future to read their record, would we be comfortable with what they saw and would our recording enable them to understand their journey and support their development of a positive identity.
- Avoid language that stereotypes and labels people – describe the behaviour with evidence and information.
- Acknowledge what we observe and validate – ‘I see your upset’, for example.
- Acknowledge that when people are afraid, they can become controlling in terms of their behaviours to cope.
- Shaming people for what they should have known never supports progress – helping them to see what they don’t know yet.

how can we recognise and honour's people's feelings?

- Make our words matter within our conversations and within our recordings.
- If the child or young person/family was sat beside us when we talk or write about them and their situation, what would they think and how would they feel.
- Does the person understand what is being said – how can we assist them to understand.

Abbreviations:

Working in specific services, with different systems and requirements, always results in the creation of language specific to the field. Children's services are no different! We have language of our own, with further shortening of words and many abbreviations. This language can help us to understand meaning, understand need, allocate resources and understand plans. The language we use can often speed things up, make it clear what type of need there is and what services are being offered.

However, when some of the terms we use are used in forums with other professionals or families/children, there isn't always a shared understanding of their meaning. This can result in isolation, disconnect and can add to power imbalances. The intention of the phrase/abbreviation is not always clear or understood and this becomes even more challenging where by a person has additional learning needs or where English is not the primary language.

When we consider where we can make changes to abbreviations and jargon our initial starting point can be the following:

- Looked after children being abbreviated to LAC, this can be interpreted as 'lacking' in something.
- Child in need abbreviated to CIN which can sound like SIN suggesting something bad about them.
- Placement – suggests this is where the child has been put for a while.
- Service user – suggests that the person has a choice, and they are actively using the service.
- Respite – which suggests taking a break from something uncomfortable which in this context is a child/young person – this can result in the child/young person thinking that people need a break from them as they are flawed.

Directory

Below is the starting point for changing our language, examining the language we use and looking at ways in which we can ensure that our use of language is not adding to harm, shame and blame. This is not an exhaustive list and no doubt we can all identify other words/phrases that are not within this document.

This is more of a starting point of our journey – in critically evaluating our language and starting to talk together about how we communicate with one another and the children and families we work alongside. Our aim is to ensure that our communication is meaningful and builds communication and relationships with care and compassion – this being the cornerstone for our work.

If you have any suggestions to add to this directory, please make contact and we will include these in future work. This has already been contributed to by many staff and the findings of our audit activity. There is a real commitment and drive to ensure that our practice continues to reflect our values.

These words should help us to rethink our language and there are some suggestions for alternative ways in which common words we use could be spoken or written in a less harmful manner.

Word used	Alternative
Aggressive, argumentative	Person X has a right to be angry but needs safer ways to express this; Person Y has been give some difficult information and needs time to process this and currently feels angry about the information they have been given; Person Y has not had the opportunity to learn ways to self sooth and self-regulate; Person B is passionate about this subject as it means a lot to them.
Behavioural issues: Angry; Defiant; Attention seeking; Melt down	Trying to communicate but doesn't have the words; Connection seeking; Trying to show us how upset they are; Managing big/difficult emotions/feelings; In pain; Frightened/scared/anxious; Trying to gain control; Feeling shame/guilt; Unable to soothe or accept soothing care.
Unacceptable behaviour	Understandable behaviour in the context of their lived experience
Case	Child/young person – name; Family we/I are/am working alongside

None engagement Failure to engage Difficult to engage Did not engage Wont engage	<p>We haven't found a way to connect with this person yet;</p> <p>Is struggling with a very difficult situation;</p> <p>Is avoiding feelings of shame/pain or fear by not being around people who are trying to help;</p> <p>Did not pick up the phone/reply to me/wasn't at home;</p> <p>Person X has said they do not wish to work with/me/service</p>
Disguised compliance	<p>Is avoiding a difficult situation;</p> <p>Avoiding further pain/distress/shame/harm;</p> <p>Is worried about the consequences of telling the truth/their story;</p> <p>Always consider whether this is an active attempt to mislead – or a coping mechanism</p>
Contact	<p>Family time;</p> <p>Spending time with family</p>
Eating disorder	<p>Disordered eating</p>
Committed suicide	<p>Died by suicide</p>
LAC Looked after child	<p>Care experienced;</p> <p>Living away from their families;</p> <p>Living with different families</p>
Connected carer Special guardian	<p>Living with a relative;</p> <p>Looking after their grandchild – nephew, niece</p>
Perpetrator	<p>Person who caused harm;</p> <p>Person who can cause harm;</p>
Mental health difficulties	<p>Diagnosis of;</p> <p>Has difficulties managing difficult emotions;</p> <p>Has not been encouraged to develop the skills to manage/regulate their emotions;</p> <p>Finds situations anxiety provoking;</p> <p>This means that when Person A is feeling low he/she can.....</p>
Substance abuser	<p>Uses alcohol/name of substance – this is separate from who they are.</p> <p>Person X says they use.....</p>
Peers	<p>Friends</p> <p>Mates</p> <p>Support</p>
Sibling	<p>Brother or sister</p>
Puts his/her needs above the child's/children – implies a conscious effort to do this.	<p>Needs support to recognise/understand their child's needs;</p> <p>Needs a way to balance all the needs of the family;</p> <p>Needs support to understand the impact of his/her behaviour/choices or illness on their child and how alternative action could be taken.</p>
Poor home conditions	<p>The following observations of the home lead me to conclude the home is unsafe/unhygienic;</p> <p>The following needs to change to the home to ensure the children are safe and comfortable.</p>

No attachment	Complex relationships; Describe the relationship; Finds it hard to connect; Connect in ways that causes hurt; My observations of X and Y's relationship are....
Kicking off	A family/child person is in crisis right now and is struggling to manage how they are feeling;
Transition	Big change; Life change/life stage.
Stepping up/down	Needs have changed; Different services would be better at this time; X would be better supported by X team
Manipulative Lying	Person X has had to develop good ways of keeping herself safe; Person X is in the developmental stage where truth and lies mean; Person A is worried what telling the truth would mean.
Abscond/Missing	Things are pushing them away from where they need to be; Left without people knowing; Things are pulling them to other places/people.
Failed to protect Unable to protect	Needs support and guidance to keep them safe; Needs support and guidance to understand the impact on the children; Unable to recognise the person's behaviour is harmful to them/their children.
Threshold	How we understand what is going on; How we understand needs; How we organise services to meet these needs; This is the right service for the family; This is not the right service for the family; Needs have been explored and this is the outcome
Physical chastisement	Child has been hit/smacked, name the action and behaviour.
Significant harm	When talking to families – we are worried X has been harmed/hurt or is likely to be harmed/hurt because of...
Did not attend	Was not taken to the appointment – the reason why
Allegation/disclosure	The young person has said...
Placing themselves at risk	Missing or vulnerable to exploitation
Promiscuous	Behaviour which has a risk to sexual health; Develops patterns of behaviour which can be health harming.
Risky adults	Adults whose behaviour have the potential to pose a risk of harm

Further links and resources:

- <https://youtu.be/-ZrmxPIOP80> – A Child
- <https://youtu.be/Fnz1IOj2rYg> – Redacted

Essex children in care council

- Link to BASW recording tips from July 2020
- [Layout 1 \(basw.co.uk\)](#) – Top Tips for recording BASW July 2020.

This guidance should be read alongside the following:

The Child's Journey Practice Guide – Telford and Wrekin Council

Language that Cares – [TACT–Language–that–cares–2019_online.pdf \(tactcare.org.uk\)](#)

<https://youtu.be/70k6MkxuZRU> – Social Work Action Group has produced a video around the power of language and communication.

<https://orb8.org/update-2020-10-08-a-thought-for-the-month-mind-your-language.php>

Attending to language when working with exploitation – <https://youtu.be/PZtFUPQMNZk>

Ian Thomas talking about the power of language and connection <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoPHCtyVwqA&feature=youtu.be>

<https://richarddevinesocialwork.com/2020/06/19/she-prioritises-her-own-needs-above-her-childs>

<https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2021/08/inclusive-language-health-and-care>

This guide has been informed by the work of the above and the following:

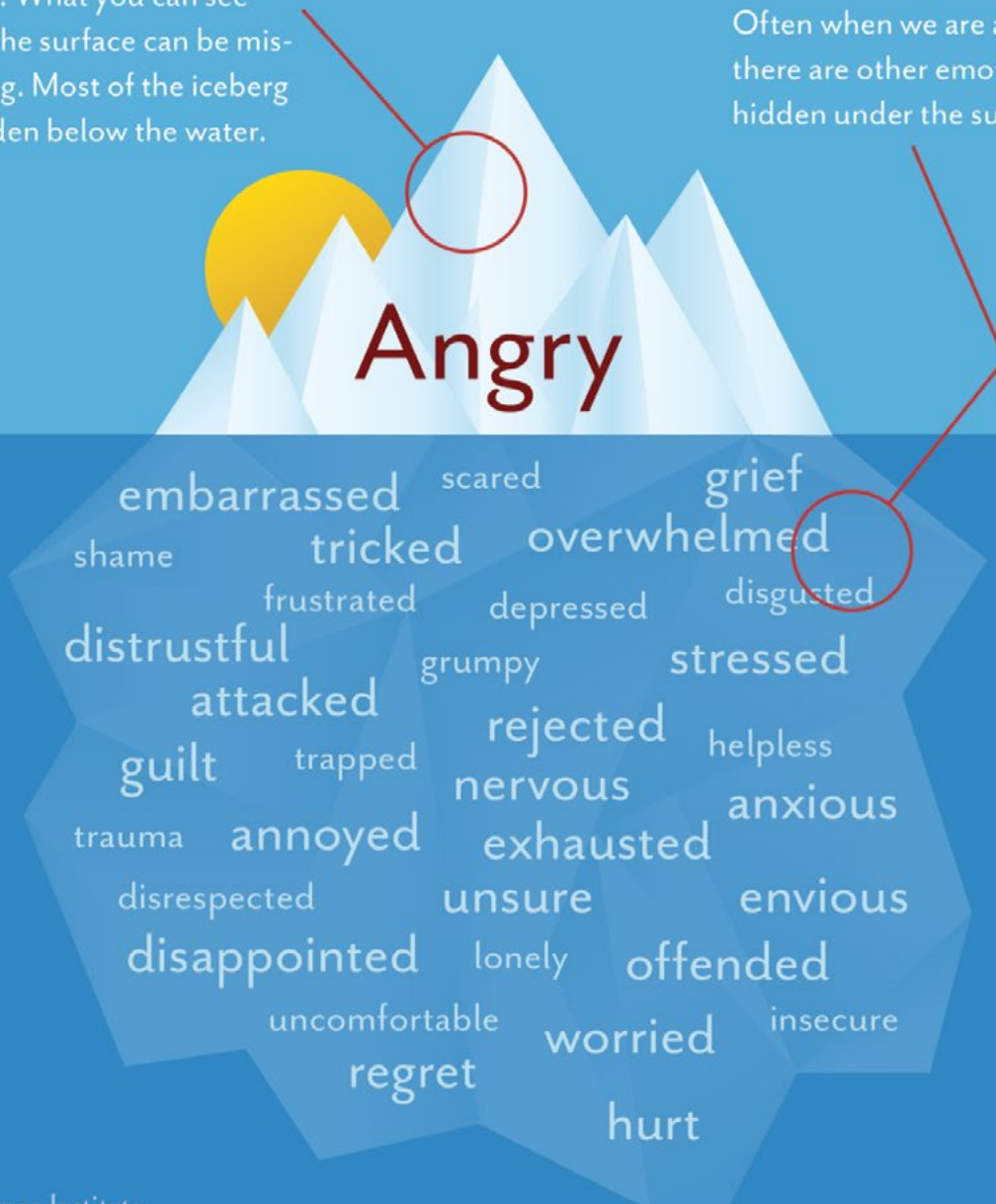
- Training delivered by Saira–Jayne Jones – Artefact’s founder, and valuable contributions from the late Yusuf McCormack. Saira@ylys.org.uk
- Your Life Your story – <https://www.ylys.org.uk>
- Mary–Ann Hodd – mahodd@gmail.com
- Smash Lives – <http://smashlifeuk.com>
- Ian Thomas – ianpresents@gmail.com
- The holistic Psychologist – <https://theholisticpsychologist.com>
- [‘Wishes and Feelings’: Misunderstandings and Missed Opportunities for Participation in Child Protection Proceedings](#) – This paper is drawn from a 3–year study into participation in child protection social work. It includes findings from qualitative interviews and a focus group, with participation from social workers, parents, and children in three local authorities in the United Kingdom. [Read more](#)
- The Experience of Life Story Work: Reflections of Young People Leaving Care Anna Buchanan, May 2014;
- Lisa Cherry – Circles and threads learning event– Trauma informed record keeping. www.lisacherry.co.uk
www.lisacherry.co.uk/trauma-informed-ways-of-being
- Carolyn Spring – Unshame
- Camden Local Authority – FGC resources
- Brene Brown – various publications
- The Gift of Experience the Truth Unwrapped – Your Life Your Story

Reminders:

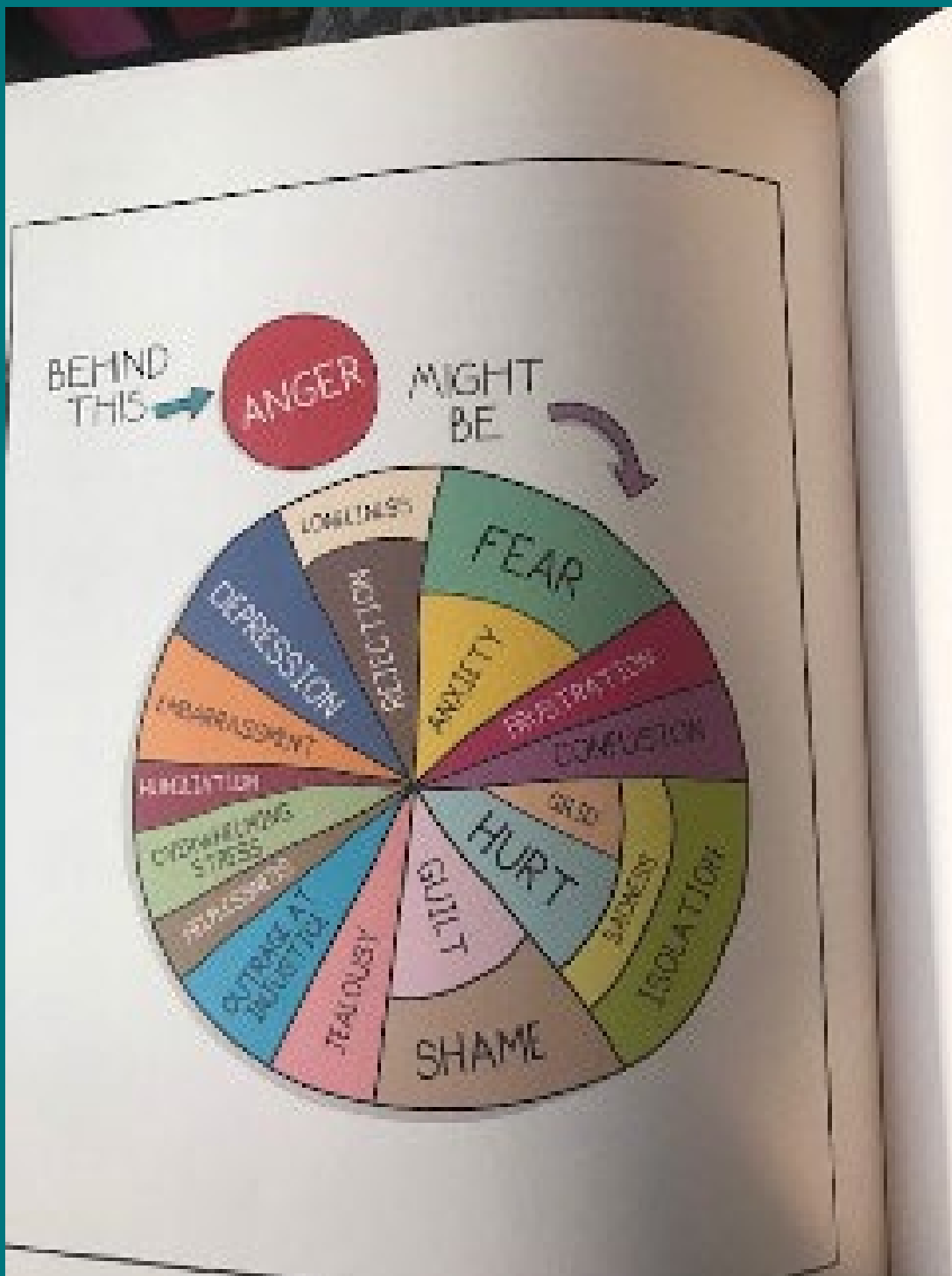
Anger Iceberg

Icebergs are large pieces of ice found floating in the open ocean. What you can see from the surface can be misleading. Most of the iceberg is hidden below the water.

This is how anger works. Often when we are angry, there are other emotions hidden under the surface.



The Gottman Institute



Our reflections on language:

