

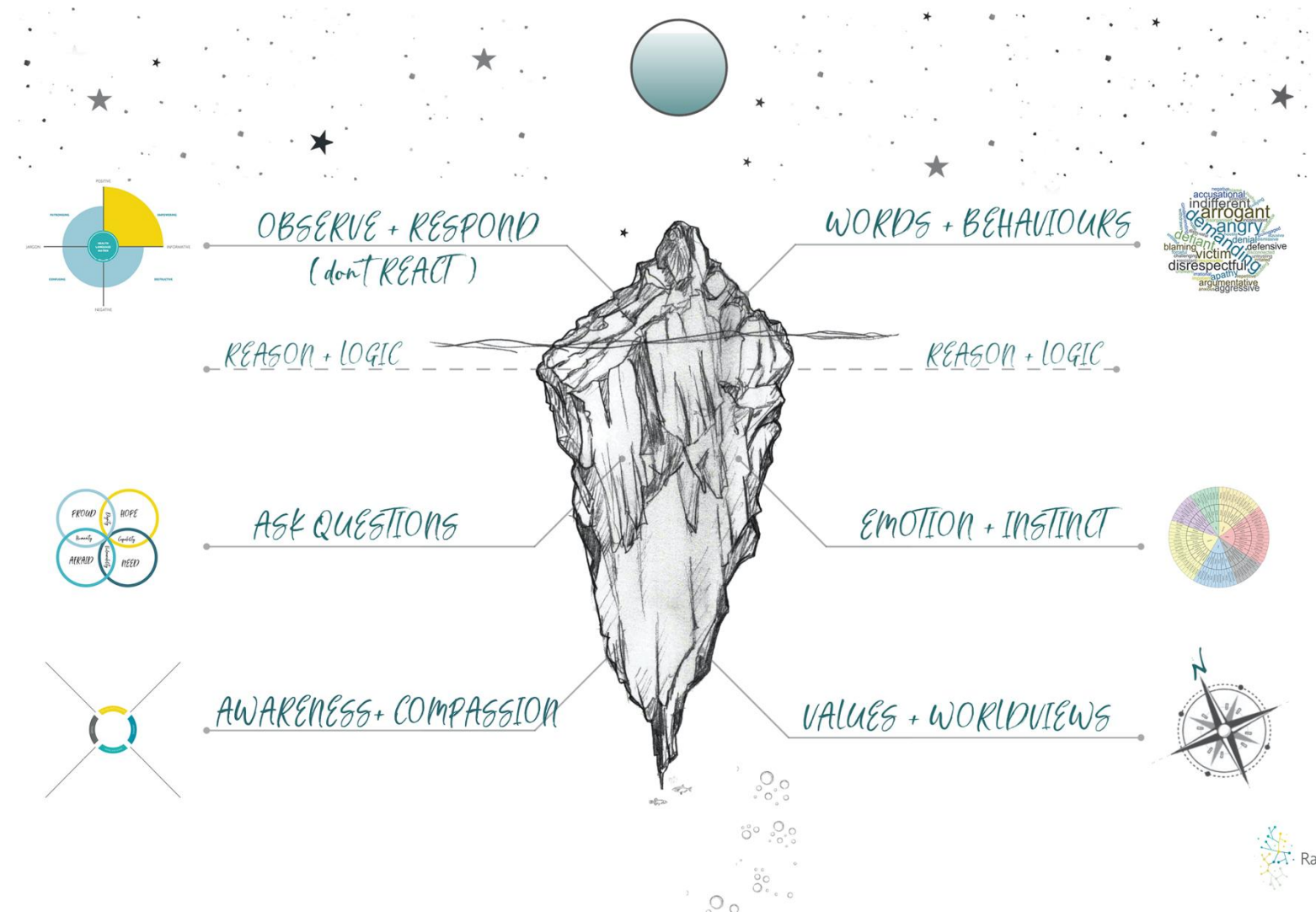
# Words that transform care: applying compassionate clinical communication in practice



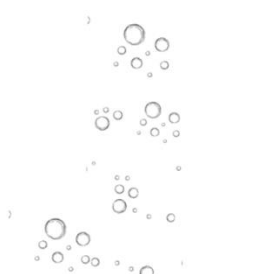
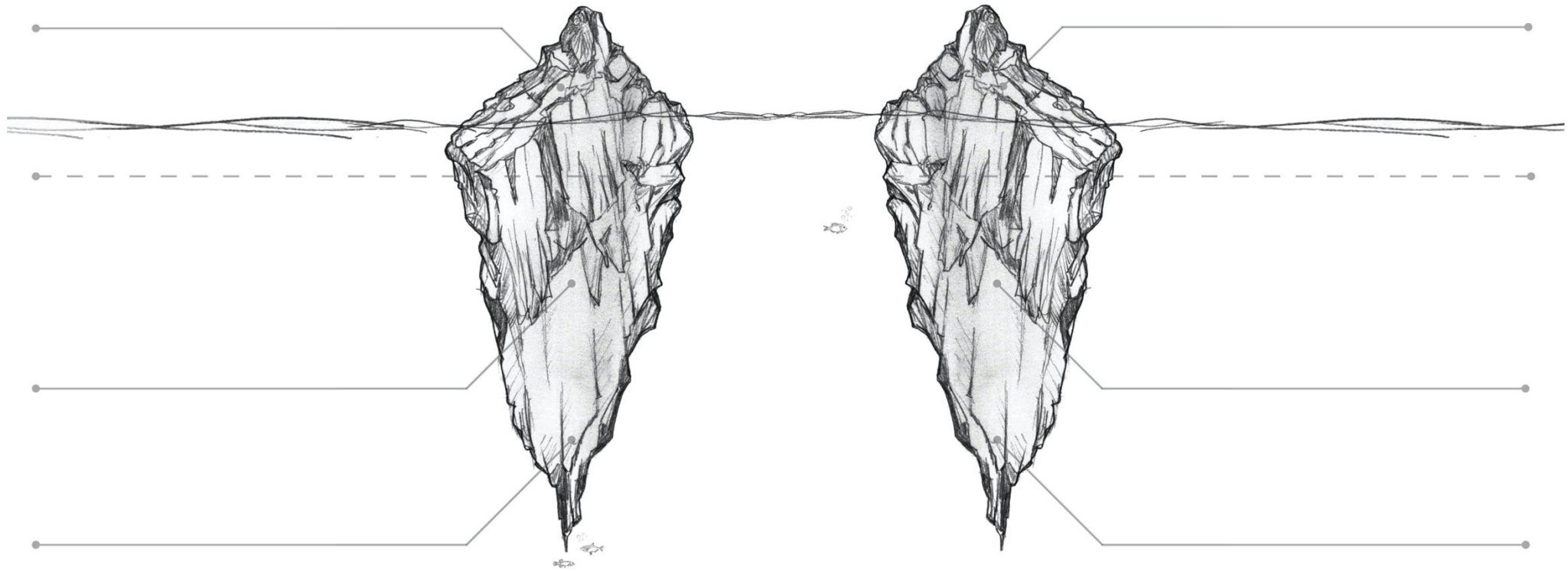
Rachel Callander

My presentation shared a few tools for compassionate communication from a larger communication program I run called **"Below The Surface."**

Please reach out to me if you think this training could be useful for your team and practice.

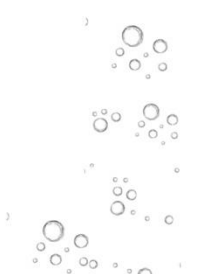
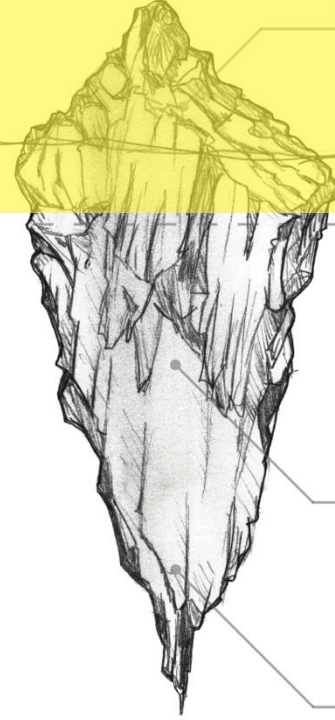


For people to be helped, they need to be known



OBSERVE + RESPOND  
(don't REACT)

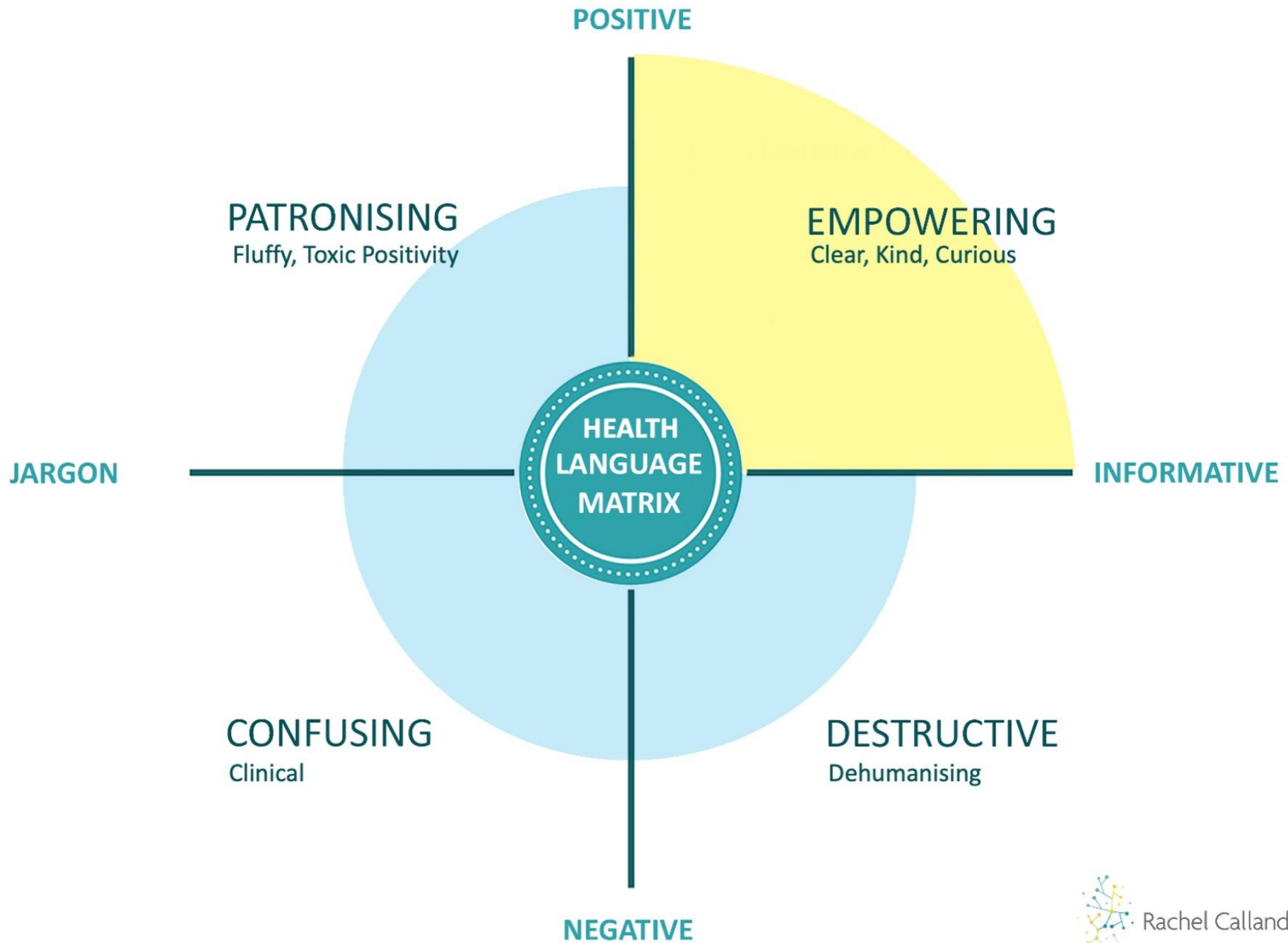
WORDS + BEHAVIOURS

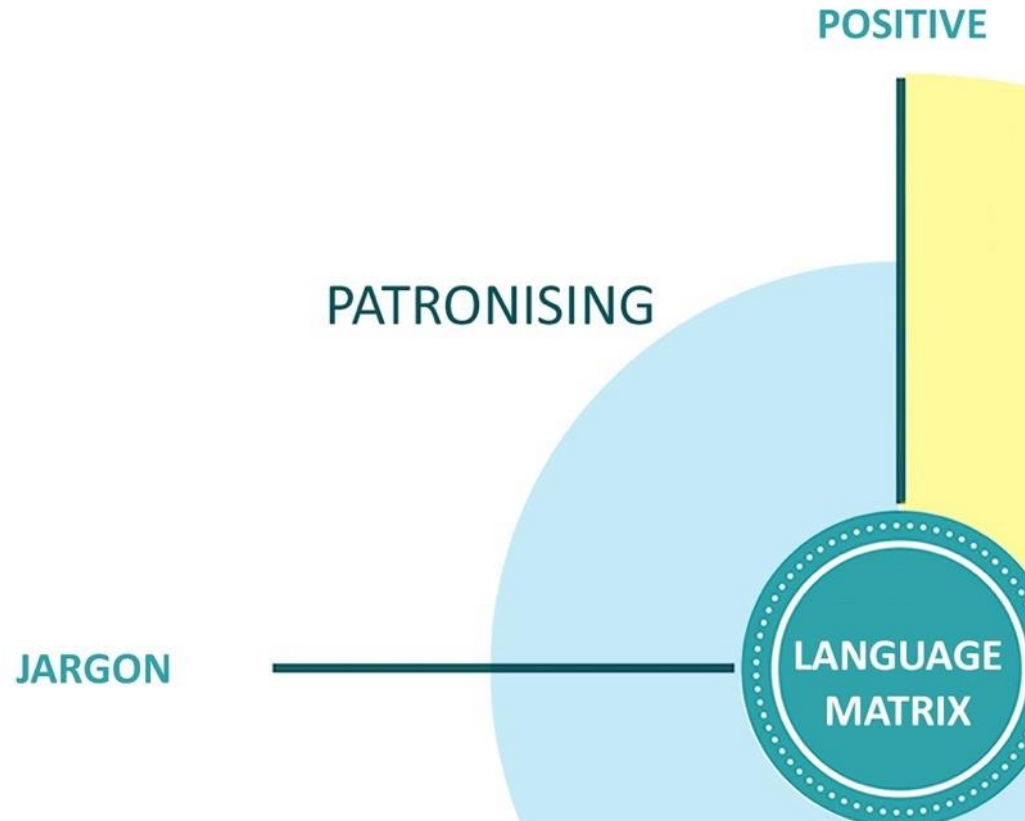












**Cliché, fluffy, toxic positivity.**

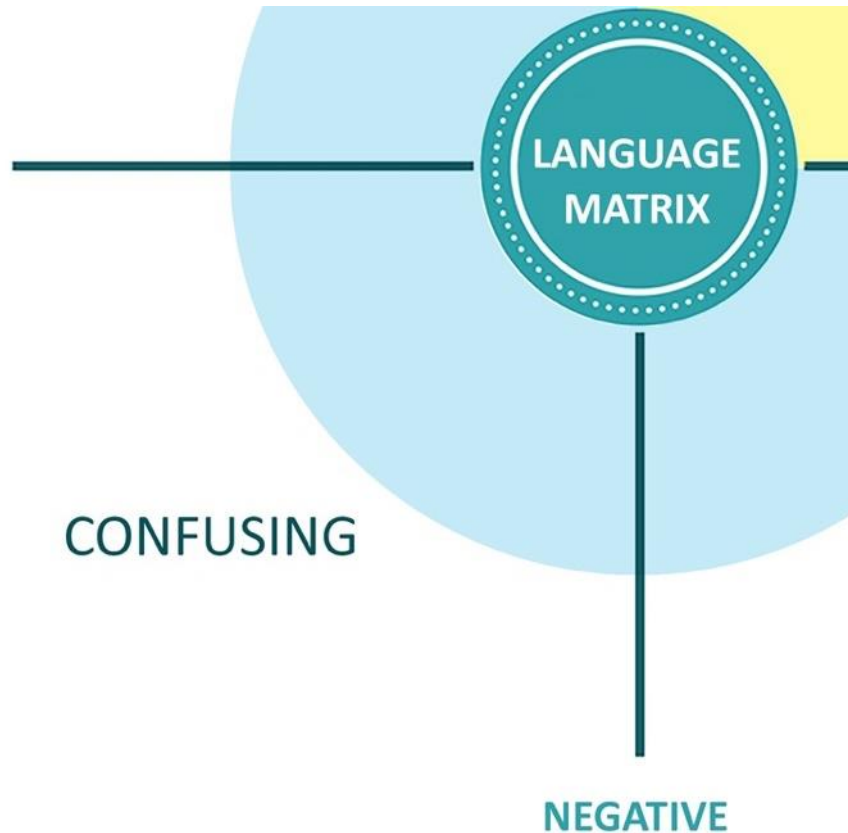
This kind of communication style makes a person feel dismissed, unseen and unheard.

While it comes from a well-meaning and kind space - it doesn't always land kindly. We fear saying the 'wrong' thing, so we rely on the familiar or cliché as a response to the discomfort we feel in having difficult conversations and being confronted with difficult experiences.

We lean toward positivity as a way of shielding us from the hard reality of a situation, but this can end up being toxic, as it dismisses and minimises the variety of emotions that need to be expressed, acknowledged and held.



JARGON



**Wastes time, harms relationships.**

You cannot make good decisions when you are confused.

Confusion can lead to frustration, which can lead to anger and negative behaviour. You may find yourself on the receiving end of that anger even if you had nothing to do with the initial confusion.

Confused patients/families may be wary of experts and specialists and may be slow to trust you. They may resist your suggestions and might appear shut down, be labelled “non –compliant”, or even “difficult”.

You may be working with people who have been in the system for years who may be grieving their diagnosis experience or change in life circumstance.

Be gentle with yourself, and with them.

Being aware of the kind of language and treatment they have already encountered and being able to bring clarity to the information they have been given, is a big part of your work, and ultimately your success.

The medicine language you speak fluently may not be the language your patient has learned yet. Help them to understand it. It will take time and patience.

Confusion, will waste so much of your time, your patients' time and it will erode the chance to have a positive and collaborative relationship- which ultimately affects health outcomes.



### Dehumanising, soul-destroying.

A person understands this kind of language, but it deeply hurts and can cause distress.

It adds a layer of pain and grief that is unnecessary. This language can take a person's humanity away and will diminish their potential and ability to see their strengths and uniqueness.

If these words are spoken frequently over a person in their life, they will start to believe that this is what and who they are.

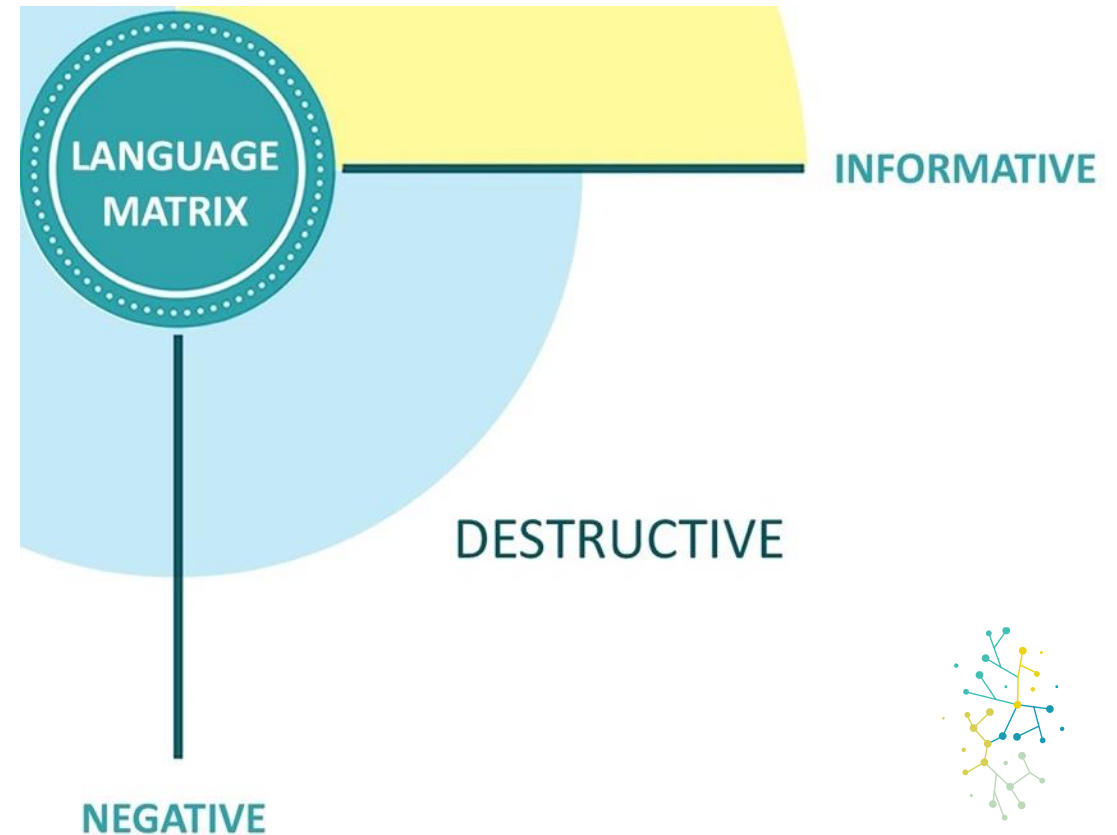
### *You can't be diagnosed with your identity.*

A medical condition or injury will affect how a person experiences their life and world, but they are NOT their condition.

This language is rife in healthcare, and we need to bring awareness to it. And to change it.

*"I always think of those words and phrases as the scars they've left behind"*

-Parent of a child with a rare condition



**POSITIVE / JARGON  
PATRONISING**

“Special kids are only given to special parents”.  
“It was meant to be.”  
“It will get easier.”  
“God only gives you what you can handle.”  
“You are doing really well for what you have.”  
(Reducing expectations)  
Any sentence that begins with “At least....”  
“I don’t know how you do it!”  
“I couldn’t do what you do.”  
“Stay strong.”  
“Don’t worry.”  
“I know how you feel.”  
“I know what you are going through.”  
“You should focus on the positives...”  
“Your child is in a better place now”.  
“It was just their time”.  
“You’ll get there in the end.”  
“At least you don’t look sick!”  
“You can’t even tell anything is wrong!”  
“If I was you, I’d...” (Judgement.)  
‘It could be worse.’ (Minimising.)  
‘Hang in there.’  
“Manage.”  
“My friend’s cousin’s husband has \_\_\_\_ so, I know all about this” (making the situation about yourself and what you know to share your own story.)  
“They will grow out of it.”  
“You’re fine / Just going through something.”  
“It’s normal.”  
“I understand what you’re feeling.”  
“You’re lucky”  
“Don’t make a big deal of it.”  
“He/She lived a full life.”  
“You can try again.”  
“It’s not as bad as you think.”

**NEGATIVE / JARGON  
CONFUSING**

ANYTHING A PATIENT GOES HOME TO GOOGLE! (Remember they do this alone, and without any knowledge of whether the info they look up is relevant, correct, or useful - this can add more confusion and more disconnection.)  
Terminology, medical speak, medical terminology. (Professionals can hide behind this kind of language as an emotional shield to protect them from feeling too much. But it causes more harm to everyone in the long term. This kind of language, until it is understood, is a barrier to connection.)  
Medical Jargon.  
Acronyms!!!!!!!  
“Percentile Ranks.” “Standard Deviation.”  
“Global Developmental Delay.”  
“Developmental Delay.” “Significant Delay.”  
Severity Levels. Levels in general. Non-specific measurements.  
“Bilateral.”  
“Sensorineural.”  
Mixed messages from medical professionals. (You may need to ask what they have been told.)  
“Prognosis.”  
BIG WORDS - or words that do not usually appear in regular person language. They don’t have to be big to be scary.  
Vagueness.  
Information overload - a person can only take in so much info at once, then it is just a blur.  
Assuming patients have a background knowledge of biology and health etc.  
“Side effects”  
“Weight-based dosage.”  
Explaining insurance benefits with patients.  
Appeal process. Time frame.  
Inside language

**NEGATIVE / INFORMATIVE  
DESTRUCTIVE**

Words with negative connotations.  
Incompatible with life.  
Setting limits on the patient.  
Making assumptions. Assuming everyone with the same diagnosis will be the same.  
Referral to what is ‘normal’ or ‘typical.’  
‘Confined to a wheelchair.’  
‘Suffers from.....’  
“Malformed/malformations.” “Deformity.”  
Putting patients in a box - limitations.  
“X amount of time to live.”  
“Downs Child.” “Downie.”  
“Skills deficits.”  
Labels.  
“Abnormal.”  
“Spastic.”  
“Norms.”  
“Complex.”  
Having lower expectations.  
“Below Average.” “Atypical.”  
“There’s a missing part.”  
“What do you mean, they can’t do that?”  
Deficits based.  
“Disordered.”  
“Significant Delay.”  
“Impairment.”  
“Weakness.”  
“Retarded.”  
“Mutated.”  
“Low Functioning.”  
Red Flags.  
“Neurotypical.”  
People “like that.”  
“What’s wrong?”  
Delay (Speech/Walking.)  
Comparing kids.  
“Does your child still walk?”  
Email delivery.  
Not allowing space for grief. “Are you still sad?”  
“Product of conception”- miscarriage.  
“We need to clear the debris”- miscarriage.

These lists are examples and thoughts from healthcare professionals and clients/consumers/patients about the different language styles in the language matrix.

Please don’t judge or berate yourself if you realise you have used these types of language in your own communication with patients and peers.

Use these examples to bring awareness to your language, so you can adjust and change it where you can, keep a person’s humanity intact, and ensure you are explaining things in a way that is understood.

Be aware of other examples that are relevant to your field of healthcare.



**Clear, kind, curious.**

Does less talking, more asking.

Reduces assumptions.

Makes the client/consumer/patient/family the center of the conversation.

Seeks to understand a person's experience of their condition or health needs and seeks how to best care for them.

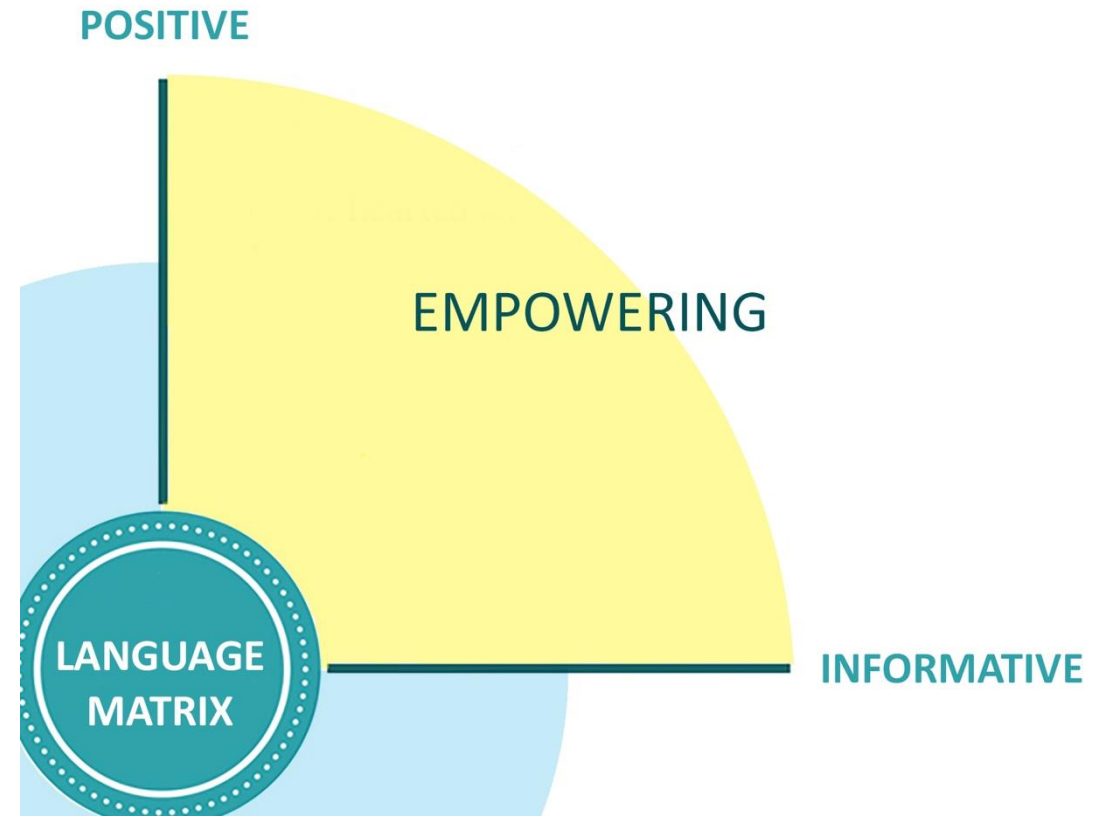
Connects and clarifies.

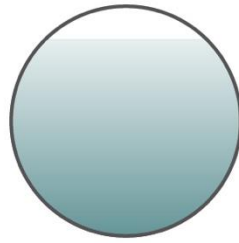
Imparts knowledge with compassion.

The quality of questions increases the clarity of answers. The more targeted the question, the clearer the response resulting in more accurate delivery of care.

Asking powerful and high-quality questions, and then really listening to the answers is compassion in action.

This kind of communication is aligned, it seeks to understand a person and what they need, and it connects us to our shared humanity. Our expertise and knowledge can be delivered and transferred in a way that is meaningful, truly serves, makes a difference, and alleviates suffering.





OBSERVE + RESPOND  
(don't REACT)

WORDS + BEHAVIOURS

REASON + LOGIC

REASON + LOGIC

ASK QUESTIONS

EMOTION + INSTINCT



# Opening Questions

Establishes boundaries and expectations.

What should I call you? What do you like being called?

What are you hoping to achieve, learn, get out of your time here today?

What has brought you here today?

What is your understanding of your condition, health issues?

How does this condition/injury/issue affect your life?

What do you already know about.....?

What do you know about our services?

What do you know about this referral?

# Closing Questions

Clarifies, ensures understanding.

What have you understood from our conversation today?

What have you heard me say?

Is there anyone else in your life that needs to hear this?

Do I need to write anything down or explain things to you in a different way?

When you leave here today, do you know the next steps?

Is there anything that I have said, that you will go home to google later?

Can I give you more information?



## Opening Questions

Establishes boundaries and expectations.

Did you know a referral has been made?

What would make the biggest difference for you in this session?

What would you like me to know about your child/your family?

What do you know about us?

What is your understanding of....?

How have things been since we last met?

Can you share what your experience has been like so far?

Help me understand any cultural/religious practices that are important to you?

## Closing Questions

Clarifies, ensures understanding.

How would you like us to communicate with you? Text, phone, email etc.

How are you feeling after everything we have done/talked about in this session?

Would you like to re-address anything we have discussed today?

You told me you were feeling..... Can you help me understand what that is like?

Have we addressed your biggest worries/concerns today?

What will you think about on your drive home?

How will you tell those close to you, what I have told you today?

## Empowering Questions:

Questions that help us learn more from another, while also helping us to engage compassionately, clearly and curiously. They allow us to direct our knowledge and care in meaningful ways.

These overarching question themes or banner questions are often too big to be answered and can even be unsafe or triggering. They are a guide, to help us think about how else to ask these big questions.

Breaking them down into nuanced pieces allows the highest quality of response and relationships to be built.

These nuanced questions are especially useful in healthcare- Allied Health, disability, injury, chronic illness, cancer, rare disease, aged- care, indigenous communities, genetic services, General Practice

What are you **PROUD** of?

What do you **HOPE** for?

What are you **AFRAID** of?

What do you **NEED**?



## Empowering Questions:

The following lists are questions that have been created during workshops with healthcare professionals across many specialties. The healthcare professionals were asked to think of as many ways of asking these 4 questions, to help them to feel more confident in communicating with their patients and colleagues. These lists are not exhaustive, and you may want to think of others that are more relevant to you in your work. They serve as a starting point for you as you start to think of ways to have more meaningful and clear conversations.

Read through these lists of questions, identifying any that resonate. Make a note of them and start using them on those around you. It may feel awkward and strange at first. Getting used to new ways of communicating will take time and practice until it feels natural.

What are you **PROUD** of?

What do you **HOPE** for?

What are you **AFRAID** of?

What do you **NEED**?



# What are you PROUD of?

What's working for you already?

How does that look?

Can you tell us more about that?

Can we enhance anything about this?

What matters to you?

What's the best part of your life?

What do you enjoy doing?

What pleases you about your child's progress?

What works with your family?

Have you already had a good outcome, and what was it? What made it good for you?

What makes you smile when you think of your child?

What delights you about your child?

What delights your child?

What's your favourite thing, or what do you love most about your child?

What makes your child sparkle?

What is something good that happens in your day?

What inspires you?

What are your strengths?

What are some achievements you are proud of?

What is it like to be you?

What makes you feel you are your best you?

What do you love about yourself?

What do you enjoy about yourself?

What matters to you today?

What was the best part of your day?

What's been great about today?

What gives you joy?

What has been a high-five moment today?

What would a high five moment look like for you?

What are the things that make you feel more alive? When do you feel most alive?

How have you impressed yourself?

Is there something cool that you've been up to? What is cool to you? If you could get up to something cool, what would that be?

What's something you've done that you never imagined you would do?

What makes you laugh?

What makes you happy?

What do you enjoy doing?

What has energised you this week?

What do you do well?

What do you do best at school?

What makes you get out of bed in the morning?

What do you love about the person you care for?

What's a memory that brings you joy?

What makes you feel joy?

What are your superpowers?

What do you best when you are at home?

What excites you?

What has made you smile today?

Has anything happened today that put a bounce in your step?

What have you done that's brought great joy to you or someone else?

What has made you feel thankful today?

Has anything made you feel grateful today?

What's floating your boat right now?

What good things have you noticed today?

What do you love to do?

What do you love to do together?

What is your experience of life?

What is your experience of your condition?

What are some of the challenges you've overcome?

What are your child's strengths?

What was a win for you or your child this week?

What went well this week? What worked?

We can see how much your child has improved with \_\_\_\_\_. Is there anything else you can see that they are improving with?

What does a happy moment look like for your child/your family?

How do you celebrate your child?

What achievements have you had as a family?

What is something new you/your child has learned?

What is something you feel you have had success with or achieved?

What skills have you learned through being your child's parent?

What do you think your strengths are as a parent?



# What do you HOPE for?

What are your dreams?

What inspires you?

What are your short or long-term goals?

What would quality of life look like for you?

In a week/month/year's time, what would you like to be different?

What is your vision for you/your child?

What would you like to achieve?

How can we help you to get there?

What is fun for you?

What would you like more of in your life?

What would you like less of in your life?

What does a good day look like?

What does a bad day look like?

How many good days have you had this week/month?

How many bad days have you had this week/month?

Do you think about the future?

What does it look like for you?

Do you have any aspirations or goals?

If you could change one thing in your life to make it better, what would it be?

What are you looking forward to?

What brings you comfort?

Is there something you've imagined doing but never done?

Can we work towards that?

What is the first step towards this?

Who do you want to be?

How do you want to feel?

What are you feeling good about doing today?

What are you looking forward to celebrating?

What would make you smile?

What is important to you?

How far would you like to get with that this week? / This month? / This year?

How would you like to celebrate achieving these things?

What matters most to you?

What would you like tomorrow to look like?

What are you curious about?

When do feel most free?

What does quality of life look like to you as a family?

What does a good outcome look like to you?

What is your goal? What can I do to help you reach that goal?

What will it look like when it is better?

When you leave today, what is one thing you'd like to have achieved/discussed/put in place/started/finished?



## What are you **AFRAID** of?

---

What is forefront on your mind?

What is the top priority for you?

Is there anything you are unsure of?

Do you have any hesitations?

What are your biggest challenges?

What are the barriers in your life to achieving your goals?

What is holding you back?

What frustrations are you feeling?

What is concerning you right now?

What bothers you right now?

Are you worried about anything in particular?

What is one concern in the forefront of your mind?

How does this affect the others in your family?

What gives you butterflies in your stomach?

Do you have any fears of what's to come / next steps?

What are your concerns with the process? With the therapy?

What keeps you up at night?

Is there a thought that wakes you up at night?

How do you respond to stress?

What challenges are you facing? Socially, as a family, academically...?

Do you have any environmental challenges?

Does this sound possible? If not, what is holding you back from thinking it is?

What is missing?

What are your biggest concerns?

Is there anything you wish you could change about this situation?

What is worrying you the most?

What isn't working for you anymore?

What upsets you the most?

Is there anything you are avoiding?

Is anything making you anxious?

What questions do you have?

How does this affect your child? Your family?

What doesn't feel right or make sense?

What concerns do you have about your child's/your future?

What do you find challenging?

Is there anything that you have heard/ seen/googled that is causing you distress?

What are the most challenging parts of your day?

How can we support you to make those challenges easier?



# What do you *NEED*?

What would make your life easier?	How can I show up big for you?	What is harder than it needs to be?	Who else needs to be in the team?
How can we get you what you need?	What could be done differently?	What can we explore further with you?	How can we best work together?
What would good support look and feel like?	Imagine if you had all that you need right now, what would be different?	Are you getting adequate support? Do you feel supported? Is there anything missing?	Is there anything that we can learn from you, that would make things better?
How can I best help you today?	What is already working for you?	What is one thing that would make your/your child's life better/easier?	Is there anything that we are missing, or not fully understanding about you/your child/your family?
What do you need to move forward? What is the next step?	How can we enhance the things that are already working for you?	What are the hardest things for you as a family?	Are there any barriers to you getting or asking for support?
What is the most important thing to you? What is your biggest/priority?	What works and what should we keep doing? What isn't working and what should we stop doing?	How do you think we can support you?	What have you been told about your child's diagnosis?
What makes your day harder than it needs to be? What one thing could make life better for you?	What help is helpful? What help is unhelpful?	What supports do you have in place to help your child? What supports do you have to help YOU?	How do you feel about this?
Is there anything I can do for you right now?	What makes you feel safe?	Do you have questions that need answers?	Is there anything you are still unsure about relating to your child's diagnosis?
How does this impact your life?	What feeling would you like to reduce in your life?	Can you think of anything that would make this better for you?	Does your child's diagnosis carry any additional relevance culturally/religiously to you?
What would really help here?	Are you struggling with anything?	Are there things that would be useful for you to learn that we can teach you?	How can we best support you culturally/religiously?
Is anything else required?	Can I provide you with more information?	How can we best support you and your family?	What is this like for you as a parent? As a family? How can we support you/your family?
How could I connect with you in a more meaningful way?	How can I support you?	Is there anything you need more information on?	Is there anything that we are doing that is not working?
How do you feel about today's news?	Is there anything hindering you? Are there any roadblocks?	What have you understood about your child's diagnosis?	Do we need to change anything?
What do you need from me to be at your best?	Who or what will help get you to your next step?	What have you understood about your diagnosis?	How do you think we can change things to make this better?
What can't you live without?	How can we assist with this process?	What would be most helpful for you and your family?	Just because we can do certain things (treatment) doesn't mean we should. Is there anything you'd like us to stop?
What would be most helpful in this moment?	What is missing? What further information do you need? How do you feel about...?	What more can be done to support your family and the goals we have made?	
Is it OK to be here with you now?	What are your thoughts on...?	What do you need to flourish?	
What can I do to support you?	Can you see a way that we can make things easier for you? Can we make things easier for you?		
Is there something I can help you to make different?			
Is there anything more I can do for you right now?			



Here are a few questions that I resonate with. I chose one from each section, so I can remember them easily and they become part of my everyday interactions with people.

I don't need to ask all four questions, but the habit of asking just one or two of these in a conversation, helps me to really listen, and then ask better follow up questions based on what the person I'm talking with has said.

These questions are starting points, de-escalators, connectors and clue finders. They reduce judgement, assumption and fear.

You'll find the more you use this kind of question, the more confident you will be at asking them. You are exercising your curiosity muscle.

What are you *PROUD* of?

What brings you joy?

What do you *HOPE* for?

What are you looking forward to?

What are you *AFRAID* of?

What concerns you the most?

What do you *NEED*?

What makes your day harder than it needs to be?



**What are you PROUD of?** What is working well for you already?

**What do you HOPE for?** What does/what would quality of life look like for you?

**What are you AFRAID of?** What keeps you awake at night?

**What do you NEED?** Is there anything that we need to change, or adjust?



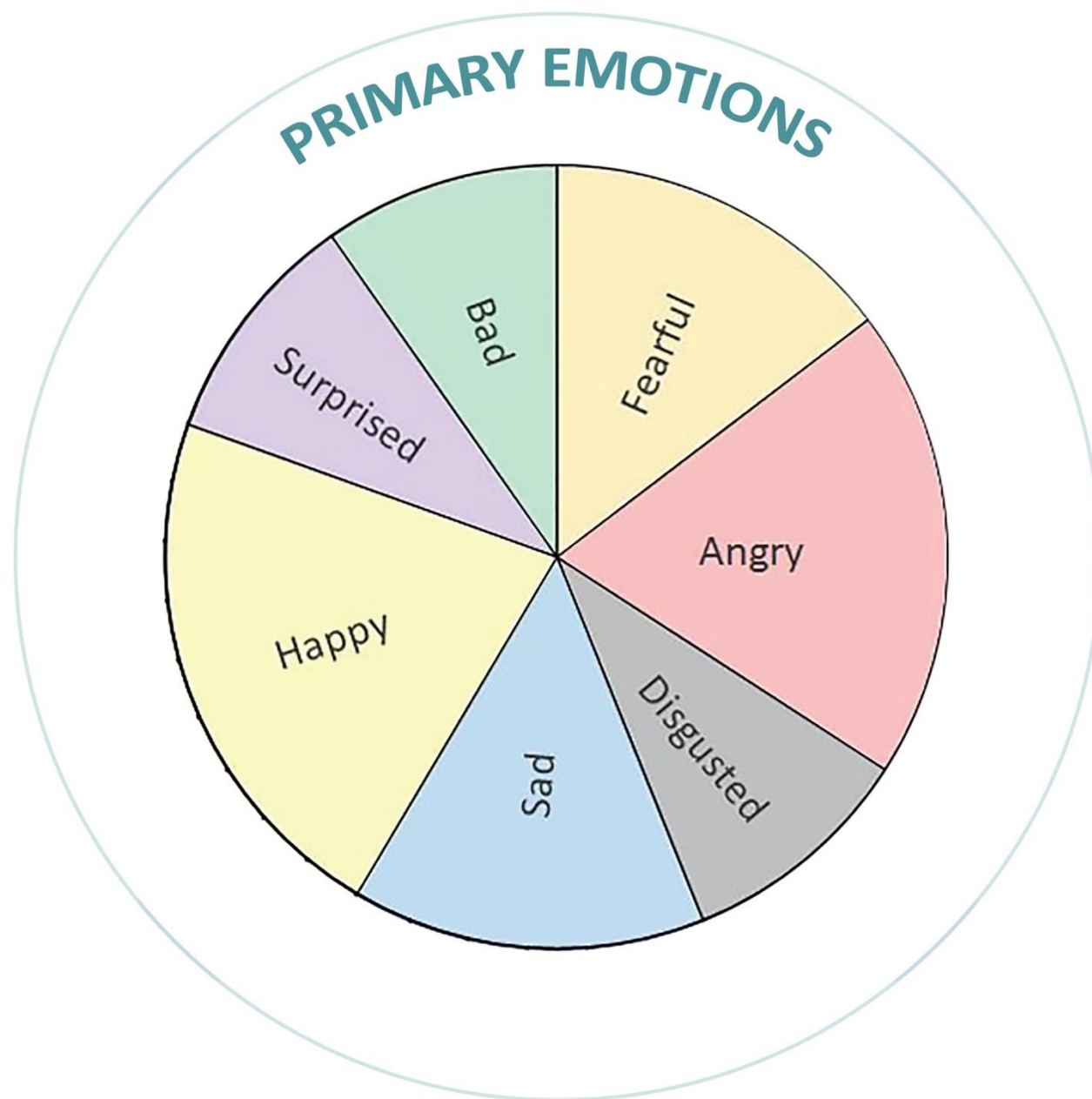
When you are working with a patient/colleague, emotions are always involved.

When emotions are running high and there is distress it can be challenging to know what to do, what to say and how to behave.

Understanding and recognising primary emotions and how to respond, is an essential part of clear, kind and effective communication.

**BE THE LOWEST HEART RATE IN THE ROOM-** many of you resonated with this.

Slowing down, reducing judgement and genuinely being curious about what the underlying issues are- goes a long way towards effective and compassionate communication.



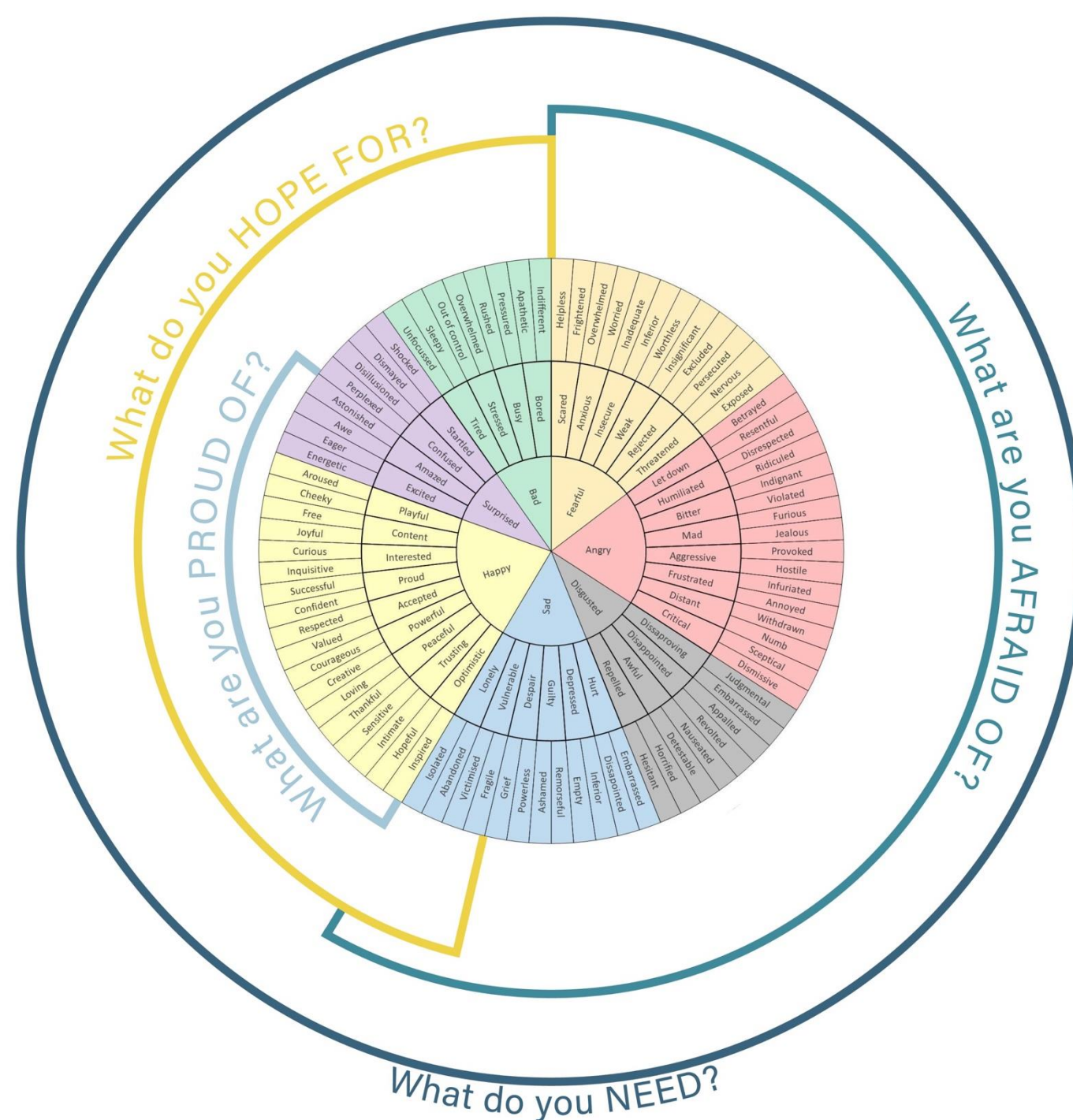


Asking questions, clarifying and acknowledging the emotion goes a long way to building connection with a person.

The 4 empowering questions framework can help here. Understanding the emotion and behaviour of the person in front of you, will give insight into the kinds of questions you can ask.

If a person is clearly agitated, angry or frustrated, asking a question from the “what are you proud of” range will probably not land, or be appropriate.

Questions from the what do you need range- no matter the emotion will have the best chance of connecting.





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