

WORKING WITH ANXIOUS CLIENTS IN LEGAL PRACTICE



WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, worry or fear that can range from mild to severe.

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA?

An event or enduring condition where:

The individual experiences a threat to life, physical or psychological integrity.

The individual's ability to integrate their emotional experience is overwhelmed.



HOW MIGHT ANXIETY AND TRAUMA PRESENT IN YOUR CLIENTS?

The Angry Client

May raise their voice, be irritable or snappy and become defensive.

The Critical/Demanding Client

May make unrealistic demands, be disapproving, etc.

The Avoidant Client

May make excuses and fail to communicate well with you.

The Frozen Client

May be unable to answer questions and make decisions.

OUR REACTION TO THE CLIENT

The Angry Client

Try to de-escalate the situation and do not tolerate abusive behaviour.

The Critical/Demanding Client

Stick to boundaries, be direct with the client and realistic with expectations.

The Frozen or Avoidant Client

Break down into small steps, present one topic or decision at a time for them.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR MANAGING ANXIOUS CLIENTS

Be Calm.

Be Clear.

Be Honest.

SPECIFIC PHRASES

Try to use...

"What I'm hearing you say is..."

"You sound pretty (down, angry, upset)..."

"I want to clarify if I've understood..."

"It sounds like..."

"Perhaps you're feeling..."

REDUCE RETRAUMATISATION

- Listen carefully to minimise the time spent reliving the incident.
- Allow the client control over where and how they talk about their trauma.
- Explain why you are asking sensitive questions.
- Take time to establish boundaries and expectations.
- Acknowledge the whole experience, even if not relevant to the legal case.
- Be mindful of the power imbalance and be patient with your client.

WHAT PROMOTES MENTAL HEALTH RECOVERY?

- Being listened to.
- Being believed.
- Having an empathetic witness to suffering.
- Being seen by at least one key person as capable of becoming fully well.



HOW DO WE PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE?

- The only behaviour we can control is our own.
- Increase awareness of your patterns with clients.
- Pay particular attention when "stuck" or frustrated.
- Promote self-reflection (on own, through writing, in supervision, with a colleague).
- Learn strategies for reflexive practice (the helicopter view).

HOW DO I INCREASE SELF-REFLECTION?

Step 1: Breathe.

Step 2: Ground.

Step 3: Check-In.

Step 4: Analyse.

Step 5: Action.



FINAL POINTS

- Try to help the client make an informed choice.
- Set realistic expectations with the client.
- Tell the client about likely duration of the case.
- Be honest with the client about likely financial settlement (if relevant).
- Make the client aware that settlement may not lead to a complete sense of justice.
- Traumatized clients are more likely to feel a sense of helplessness; promotion of the above steps more likely to help clients feel in control, and therefore reduce anxiety.

IMPLEMENTATION

To implement these strategies into your regular work, you need to plan a behavioural change, working toward a specific goal.

Examples

Going for a walk after work and thinking through the day.

Using a reflective journal to write down thoughts after speaking to a client.

Sharing thoughts with a colleague or supervisor.

Reflective sessions.

If you are interested in training, consultation or supervision for your legal practice, business or organisation, please get in touch:

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