



TRAUMA-INFORMED LEGAL ADVOCACY: PRACTICAL TIPS



Trauma-Informed Lawyering:

- Means asking “What happened to her/him?” vs. “What is wrong with her/him?”
- Rests upon recognition of characteristics intrinsic in all positive human relationships, including empathy, responsive listening, restraint from judgement, and demonstration of authentic care and concern for a client.

Basic Elements of Trauma-Informed Legal Advocacy:

- **Transparency**—Be fully transparent about your client’s legal case in easy to understand terms. This promotes trust, minimizes feelings of powerlessness, and distinguishes you from past negative relationships.
- **Predictability**—Repeatedly inform your client of what is to come, both in terms of individual meetings and the larger legal picture. This contributes to feelings of safety and decreases anxiety.
- **Client Control**—Refers to the need to give clients a voice in decisions that affect them in a way that is purposeful, exceeds baseline ethical requirements, and supports your client’s agency and empowerment.
- **Reliability**—Always follow through on responsibilities, commitments, and appointments. Survivors of trauma often expect disappointment; this counteracts that expectation. Own up to mistakes frankly with your client.
- **Proactive Support**—Anticipate issues that may be distressing or destabilizing to your client. Be familiar with mental health and social service referrals in your area so you can make them when needed.
- **Patience**—Be aware that building connections takes time! Remain patient, present, and available for your client even when times are stressful.

Preparing for and Responding to Triggers:

- Triggers are reminders of a traumatic incident that causes a person to re-experience some aspect of the incident as if it were happening in the present moment. Can be caused by sounds, smells, people, words, etc.
- **To prepare for triggers**, offer options in the physical space where you are meeting with the client as well as comforting things in the room (tissues, a stress ball, etc.). Explain in advance what will occur during your meeting and offer breaks throughout. Use open body language and be in tune with your own emotions.
- **To respond to triggers**, first acknowledge and validate your client’s feelings and use active listening skills to respond to their experience. Reassure your client that trauma responses are perfectly normal; there is nothing “crazy” or “wrong” about how they are feeling. Next, ask what would help, and offer concrete options like a glass of water or leaving the room for a few minutes. Finally, help them get grounded in the present. Let your client know they can pause to sit quietly and/or focus on their breathing. Asking simple questions to redirect their attention (“I like your shoes, are they comfortable?”) can help a client re-center.

This tipsheet was created as part of the Human Trafficking Prevention Project (HTPP), a collaboration between the University of Baltimore School of Law and Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service. For more information about the HTPP, please contact:

HTPP Project Director Jessica Emerson at jemerson@ubalt.org or 410-837-4566
HTPP Project Coordinator Heather Heiman at hheiman@mvlslaw.org or 443-451-4075