



## Clients with Trauma and PTSD- Tips for Effective Communication<sup>1</sup>

When representing clients who have been through traumatic experiences or who have PTSD, you should think carefully about your communication style or approach. You may need to take more time with these clients or carefully plan the location and surroundings for attorney client meetings. Experiencing trauma can impact how a person processes information and can impair memory or increase confusion. Building a working attorney-client relationship may be difficult. Here are some strategies for effective communication:<sup>2</sup>

- Be honest and straightforward. *This is extremely important.* Trauma sufferers are watching very closely to discern if they can trust others, including their attorney or other members of the defense team.
- Provide complete information about what to expect at each stage of the case. Tell them how long the case may take, what steps are required, and what they will experience in court. Prepare them for the press if media coverage is expected, and for the presence of hostile members of the public in the audience. Prepare them for your availability to them, and let them know how best to communicate with you.
- Slow down the process, take extra time or plan extra meetings with your client. Speak slowly and provide a quiet environment for meetings, if possible.
- Be prepared to repeat information. Check back to make sure they understood what you discussed.
- Think about physical space and location of your conversations. A person with PTSD may need to be able to see the door and feel that they can exit a situation quickly. Loud noises may be startling. When possible, find a quiet and calm environment to have conversations.

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<sup>1</sup> See the related WDA Practice Advisories *Understanding Trauma and PTSD, Clients with Trauma and PTSD: Practical Implications and Legal Issues*

<sup>2</sup> These tips represent a compilation of advice I was given when researching clients with PTSD. I spoke to a community based domestic violence advocate, a social worker with a veteran's program for post 9/11 injured vets and a forensic mental health evaluator who specializes in trauma and veterans.

## Getting information

Screening questions –A simple screening designed for medical practitioners might be useful with some clients.

- In your life, have you had any experience that was so frightening, horrible or upsetting that *in the last month*<sup>3</sup>
  - *You have had nightmares or thought about it when you did not want to?*
  - *Tried hard not to think about it or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of it?*
  - *Were constantly on guard, watchful or easily startled?*
  - *Felt numb or detached from others, your surroundings or activities?*
  
- Ask open questions – Getting clients to open up about traumatic events is not easy and there is no one size fits all approach that works. Open questions, asked with respect and compassion, might make it easier for them to share relevant information.
  - “What was going on before this happened?”
  - “What was going through your mind at the time?”
  - “What are you worried about?” or “What stresses you?”
  - “Is there anything significant in your life that you think I should know about?”
  - “I am trying to understand how you got to this point now in your life.”
  - “Have bad things happened to you in your life? Would you feel comfortable telling me just a little bit about that so I can understand how best to help you?”
  
- Try information sharing, rather than asking questions–Some clients may not be comfortable discussing their traumatic experiences, their symptoms or a diagnosis of PTSD. Information sharing may be an effective way to get them comfortable talking about their past. “We see a lot of people who have been through some really hard things” in criminal cases and “studies show” that a lot of people who are charged with a crime have had some really sad and difficult things happen to them...are just a couple of suggestions.

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<sup>3</sup> Yes to two questions is treated as a positive screen, but yes to any question is a basis to follow up.