

Trauma informed communication & assisting clients who are distressed over the phone

What is trauma-informed communication?

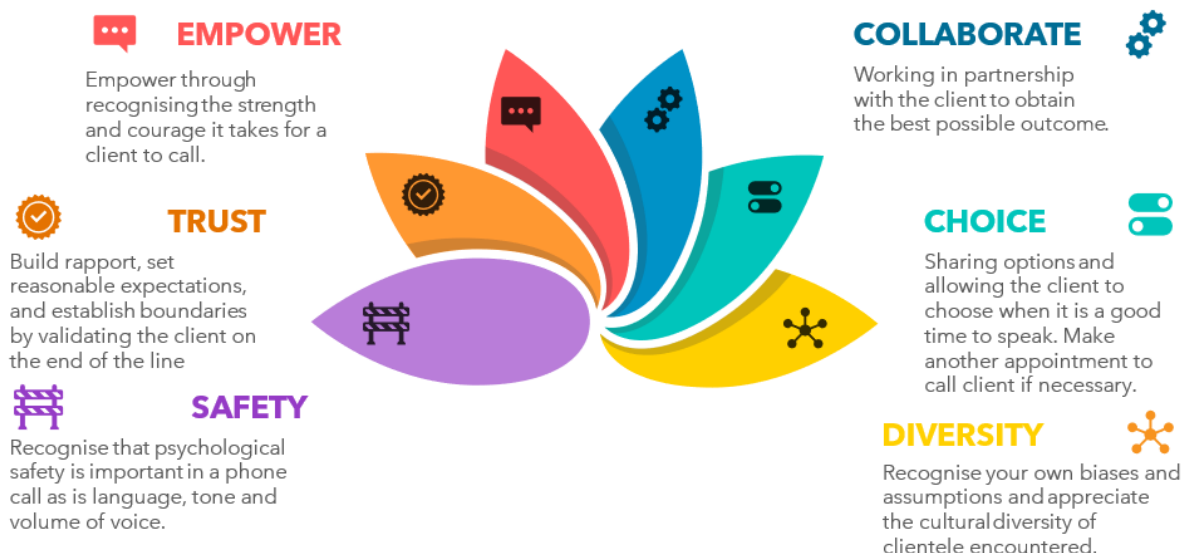
All legal assistance staff can help clients feel safer, more supported, and less overwhelmed by using trauma-informed communication techniques over the phone. Effective phone communication not only fosters trust but also encourages clients to engage more confidently with legal services.

For many clients, seeking legal assistance is challenging and uncomfortable, particularly for those who have experienced trauma or who are in crisis. A trauma-informed approach assumes that most clients have experienced trauma and acknowledges that all staff can provide effective support no matter what their role.

Feeling heard and understood assists clients to feel safe. When clients are feeling safe, they are more likely to share the information required for legal assistance, thus increasing the possibility of a favourable legal outcome. Trauma-informed communication techniques support clients to feel:

- 1) **Safe.** Support safety by being transparent and predictable and by assuming most clients have experienced trauma.
- 2) **Empowered.** By offering choices, seeking consent and being consistent.
- 3) **Heard.** Allow clients to be emotional and acknowledge their feelings.
- 4) **Understood.** Use paraphrasing, clarify what was said. Be mindful of tone of voice, use inclusive language and listen. Be your authentic self.
- 5) **In control.** By providing choices and asking for consent, for example by asking "Is now a good time to talk? Do you have a pen and paper ready?" Don't make assumptions.

Trauma Informed Principles



Trauma-informed communication over the phone

Often the first point of contact with clients is over the phone, and effective communication needs to be based upon safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment to avoid any re-traumatisation. The following is a guideline framework for establishing trauma informed communication.

THE PHONE CALL:

- Explain the reason for the call, provide your name and role clearly.
- Establish boundaries and structure of your phone call by being clear and transparent about the length and nature of the content being discussed. Knowing what to expect reduces the element of surprise, leading to building trust.
- If you have multiple phone calls with the client, be as consistent as possible leading to trust and safety.
- Ask the client if they have a pen and paper or other ways to take notes.
- Inform the client if you will send them information after the call.
- Check with the client before starting the conversation if they are in a private or quiet space - to have a conversation. If the conversation is confidential, it may be more suitable to reschedule if possible.
- Ask the client if they require any additional adjustments or an interpreter.
- Explain the reason and importance of confidentiality.
- Check with the client to see if they need a break at any time during the conversation. Plan for a break e.g. "I anticipate this telephone call will take around 45 minutes. Is it helpful to have a break at some point?"

RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION:

- If applicable, appreciate and take the time to acknowledge the courage it has taken for a client to reach out and seek assistance or advice. For example, "Thank you for contacting Legal Aid. I appreciate your patience whilst waiting for assistance....."
- Manage expectations by outlining the process, expected response times and roles of staff e.g. This phone call will take around 45 minutes today. Do you have time now to talk to me?
- Use plain English when discussing the service system and legal processes.
- Explain how the service system and legal process's function and avoid acronyms where possible.
- Acknowledge if there has been a waiting period involved for the client to hear back about legal assistance, which may be emotionally impacting on them.
- Check for understanding (and repeat information), which is particularly important during phone calls when there are no visual cues.
- Seek consent when asking for information.

EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING:

- Using a neutral tone and steady volume of voice will contribute to the client feeling comfortable to talk, even if they are distressed.

- Be mindful of the pace of the session. Even a short telephone conversation has time for a pause or to slow down the pace. Consider if an urgent pace is necessary or unnecessary?
- Where possible allow time for the client to share their story at their own pace.
- Use active listening to ensure clients feel heard, understood and respected throughout the phone call and throughout their journey.
- If a client is distressed, acknowledge their feelings and check in on the client. Make another appointment if necessary.
- If a client expresses suicidal ideation or thoughts, acknowledge their feelings and follow local protocols – for further information on supporting clients who are expressing suicidal distress see [With You eLearning Module 2 Working with Clients](#).

ENDING THE CONVERSATION:

- Always provide a summary and information about next steps and the time frame involved e.g. I will schedule another call, send information via email.
- Allow the client the opportunity to ask questions eg Are there any further questions?
- Provide clients with any additional resources or referrals to other services when necessary.
- Always follow through on what you say you will do.

AFTER THE TELEPHONE CALL:

- Speaking with clients who are distressed and overwhelmed may be challenging and distressing. This is an understandable response.
- It can be helpful to reflect on the phone conversation with a colleague or manager.
- Access your Employee Assistance Program or other organisational supports if you are feeling distressed as a result of interactions with clients.