

Working Effectively with Clients Who Have Mental Disabilities and Challenging Behaviors

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Legal services agencies, government offices, public service agencies, and pro bono attorneys provide service to a range of low-income clients with a variety of personal issues. While generally the fact that a person may have a mental health disability will not be identifiable to a staff person or advocate working with a client, there are times when cognitive issues or difficult behaviors pose challenges to effective client service. This handout is intended to help attorneys (including pro bono attorneys), government workers, law students, and advocates who work with clients with mental disabilities, who may periodically have challenging behaviors, establish good working relationships with clients to ensure effective service.

Most often, the provision of meaningful services to clients with challenging behaviors can be accomplished by providing simple and reasonable accommodations to meet the challenges posed by an individual's disabilities. Not only is this a good and compassionate way to provide service, but a range of state and federal laws mandate that public and private organizations and entities provide reasonable accommodations to clients with disabilities to ensure access to services. Perhaps the most well-known of these statutes is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The ADA anticipates that accommodations be provided to remove barriers for people with disabilities that would otherwise disenfranchise them from services to which they are legally entitled or result in discriminatory treatment toward them. An accommodation is reasonable if it does not fundamentally alter the nature of the program or service and does not impose an undue or unreasonable burden on the provider. The strategies that are provided here fall easily within the types of accommodations that programs and their staff members should be able to make to more effectively serve clients with disabilities when they have challenging behaviors.

In general, when attempting to provide effective service, a worker or advocate needs to respond to client challenges by providing appropriate accommodations, managing expectations, and setting reasonable parameters. This handout will include three major components: 1) discussion of appropriate language, including "people first" language; 2) client-centered interviewing strategies; and 3) information on providing accommodations and setting useful parameters to ensure effective service to clients.

I. Creating A Welcoming Environment through The Language We Use

The foundation for developing a good working relationship with a client begins with both the advocate's general approach and the environment that approach creates for fostering a relationship based upon mutual respect. The language we use is the first step toward building that relationship. The client who has a mental health disability is a person, first and foremost, with the same goals for home, family, and security as any other client. In order to effectively deal with any client, we need to affirm the personhood of that individual. Seeing that person as the person they are, rather than the disability they have, is key.

The language we use to describe people is one way of identifying our own challenges in viewing a client as a person first, not as their disability. Disability advocates often refer to using "people first" language as an important way to ensure that our attitude and approach in dealing with an individual is focused on seeing them as a person first. "People first" language is an objective way of acknowledging and communicating about disabilities. Please note, however, there are members of the disability community who prefer different language. For example, your client may embrace "identity-first" language, like "disabled person" or "autistic person," because it affirms their identity as a member of the disability community. It is important to consider the language an individual prefers and follow their stated preferences.

What is important in language is to avoid stereotypes and generalizations. Regardless of the language our client may prefer, it is vital that an advocate focus their thought and language on honoring the person rather than emphasizing limitations. When we use appropriate language and are guided by the client's preferences, it helps shape our thoughts and ensure that our service environments are welcoming places that respond to clients as people, rather than defining them by challenges we might perceive. The point is that words matter. They demonstrate respect and affirm personal dignity.

A few guidelines might be helpful in choosing sensitive, appropriate language. Consider the following:

- The person is not their disability so avoid terms that are medical diagnoses or outdated. The use of terms like "paraplegic," "retarded," and "epileptic" define the person as their disability first. If it is relevant to the discussion, a more appropriate expression would be, as an example, "a person who has epilepsy." In this way "people first" language affirms the person when referring to the disability by indicating that the disability is something they have; the disability is not what they are. As always, however, remember to follow your client's preferences.
- Avoid negative words that imply sympathy or pity. As an example, "Sarah has epilepsy" is neutral, while "Sarah suffers from epilepsy" indicates

victimization. Avoid terms like “is afflicted with,” “limited by,” “victim,” “suffers from,” “unfortunate,” and “imprisoned by.”

- Emphasize strengths, not limits. It is descriptive to say that “Tom walks with crutches,” rather than “Tom is crippled.” Not only does the latter emphasize the limitations or challenges, but it is less accurate.
- Avoid euphemisms such as “special,” “physically challenged,” “differently abled,” and “inconvenienced.”

If your client is comfortable with “people first” language, some examples are provided here.

People First Language

Labelling Language

people with disabilities

the handicapped/the disabled

people without disabilities

normal/healthy

person who has a developmental disability/
has a cognitive impairment/has Down’s
Syndrome/has an intellectual disability

retarded person, retard, Mongoloid,
Down’s kid

person who has autism

autistic person

developmental delay

slow

seizure disorder

fits

mental illness/emotional disorder

crazy, insane, nuts

physical disability

crippled

condition

disease

congenital disability

birth defect

The language we use helps ensure that the environment in which our client meets us is a place of respect.

II. Using Client-centered Interviewing Techniques

In traditional professional interviewing, the model had been one of professional control, rather than the encouragement of client participation. The advantages of a client-centered or participatory interviewing model is that it promotes the client’s dignity, empowers the client as a doer who is responsible for their choices, increases client satisfaction, helps

reduce cultural barriers, enhances the client's ability to achieve control over their life, and reduces client anxiety.

As explained above, the intentional use of "people first" language can help guide an advocate in working with a client. Similarly, the intentional use of client-centered interviewing strategies reduces the likelihood that an advocate will succumb to any implicit biases that cause them to judge the client, particularly the client with mental health disabilities. By developing an interview strategy based on client participation, rather than client reaction or response, advocates can also avoid any tendency to patronize the client or view themselves in a *parens patriae* role in which they need to make decisions for their client rather than providing the client with the assistance necessary for the client to make decisions appropriate to their own life. With limited exceptions, the attorney's role as advocate is to work for the stated interest of their client, not the attorney's view of the client's best interest.

There are many ways in which the advocate's life experience may be different from that of the client. First, public service agencies and governmental entities generally provide services to individuals with limited financial income and resources. Certain approaches to daily life and crises can arise from a family's financial insecurity. These can lead to judgments and assumptions about the client that may be unfair or otherwise interfere with effective service. Clients may come from cultures with which advocates are not familiar, resulting in unforeseen conflicts in the process of interviewing clients. Generational differences can affect perspective and interfere with effective advocacy. A client-centered approach helps an advocate or worker get outside of themselves to be alert and sensitive to the client's perspective.

Client-centered interviewing helps ensure that a staff person remains sensitive to the client's perspective during the course of the interview. Many different strategies can be employed, but this handout is not designed to be a treatise on the techniques of effective client interviewing. Rather, we want to emphasize the importance of a client-centered approach, particularly when working with clients with mental disabilities, and how such an approach increases an advocate's sensitivity to their own cultural biases and personal frames of reference. Clients with mental health disabilities can also require adjustments to the ordinary interview process, e.g., more time provided for interviewing or shorter interview sessions, taking of frequent breaks, careful use of language, etc. The goal in remaining client-centered is to be intentional about addressing these issues of reasonable accommodation as well.

Some basic client-centered strategies that may help facilitate interviewing results are the following:

Gauge Introductory Chit-chat: There is often a need to begin an interview with some small talk. It helps build rapport, relax both parties, and lay a foundation for client comfort in the interview setting. This can be particularly important when clients are seeking services from an attorney or benefits from a government office and are stressed or intimidated by the process. Some clients need more talk to settle in; others will find it

distracting and a waste of their time if such talk goes on too long. Watch for clues as to when to begin the “business” of your client interview.

Controlling the Floor: In much traditional professional interviewing, the government worker, advocate, or attorney “controls the floor” and generally asks closed-ended questions. In client-centered interviewing, advocates attempt a more cooperative approach to interviewing, which some studies indicate is more efficient in the long-run. For example, in the legal setting, some cooperative interview openers are, “I’d like to hear what’s on your mind,” or “Why don’t you start where you’d like to begin.” In a benefits or government service setting, it can be useful to let the client frame the question that brings them to your office. Be careful about interruptions as they may cause the loss of valuable information or change the dynamic from one in which the client feels as though they are a participant into a situation in which the client feels reactive or defensive. A defensive client will be more combative and lead to further disruption of an effective interview.

Early Revelations: There is some evidence that important client revelations may come out very early in the interviewing process and that interviewers who are not expecting that may fail to acknowledge or recognize it, resulting in client frustration and additional interviewing time. It may sound simplistic, but be aware of what your client says and listen carefully from the very beginning of the interview during any open-ended part of the process. As you let the client get their story out generally, you will be identifying the details you want to fill in later with more closed-ended questions.

Devices and Note-taking: If you are using a laptop or computer in an interview, always consider where the device is located so that it is not creating an unintended barrier between you and the client. Explain to the client why you are using the device and ask if they are comfortable with this. Also, it is important to explain to the client that you will be taking notes and why this is important to your ability to provide effective service.

Active Listening Versus Active Listening Techniques: Beware of active listening techniques early in an interview that actually end up cutting off client stories and potentially important information. Remain engaged with the client’s story by acknowledging it, but acknowledge your focus briefly. Some active listening techniques including repeating and paraphrasing what you are told, but if you exercise these techniques at the beginning of the client’s story, you may inadvertently distract the storyteller and cause them to change course and forget important information they wanted to share. Early acknowledgment can be done with short phrases, e.g., I see, hmmm, go on, etc.

Sensitive Topics: As you ease into your questioning, it helps to explain to the client that you may be asking difficult questions, but you are asking those questions for a reason—so you can figure out the nature of the client’s problem and how to best meet the client’s needs. If you know that your questions are likely to be on a sensitive issue or one likely to evoke an emotional response, you might preface your questions with some

introductory language. One way is to acknowledge that the questions are challenging; let the client know that they can take their time in answering the questions.

Time-limited Interviews: In many positions that deal with the public and in many legal services offices, there are practical time limits on the amount of time you can spend with one client. The pressure of these limits can create serious problems for someone working with a client whose disability results in disorganization. In order to manage the expectations of your client, it is useful to explain the time limits and the overall structure of the interview at the outset. Then you can ask the client for their statement of the problem. If you can see that you will need more than the allotted amount of time, a reasonable accommodation would be to offer a second appointment to complete the interview. When considering this strategy, it is important to remember the challenges many clients have with transportation and the effects of medication and sleep deprivation on a client's scheduling preferences.

Taking Breaks: Consider taking short breaks if a client is feeling very emotional. It can help re-center both the client and the conversation and de-escalate emotions. Sometimes the lengthening of an interview by taking breaks is challenging and necessitates the scheduling of a second interview. Rather than trying to push a client to complete an interview in an unrealistic time frame, setting a second interview is a reasonable accommodation that can ease stress on both the staff person and the client and save time in the long-run.

Normalizing Responses: When you think a client might feel you are judging them by information or advice that you give or that they might be put on the defensive by what you are about to say or ask, you can generalize the statements you make so that you are speaking about the situation in a general way as in "...some people may feel..." "...there are times that people..." etc.

Using Active Listening Techniques: While we have cautioned using active listening techniques too early in an interview, they can be useful for clarifying and acknowledging a client and their story later on. Techniques include repeating verbatim what you have heard, paraphrasing what you have heard, and restating it in your own words. These techniques can help you clarify information you have received. Additional active listening techniques include observable techniques such as making eye contact, using body language that indicates alertness, and taking notes, as well as unobservable efforts such as maintaining focus and remembering.

Challenges with Narrating Events: Sometimes clients, particularly clients with mental health issues, brain trauma, or other cognitive disabilities, have difficulties telling a linear story or one that is factually-based. Consider using these different strategies when you struggle with the accuracy of a client's story.

- One strategy is to speak with the client on several different occasions at different times of the day about the client's story and try to discern common threads and inconsistencies. When identifying inconsistencies and trying to

clarify with a client, acknowledging your own difficulty remembering details, or the generalized difficulty of recalling details, can put a client at ease as they attempt to focus on what happened and retell it.

- Another way to clarify facts is to get as many source documents and records as you can to determine the accuracy of facts. In situations where the client has serious memory issues, obtaining the client's consent and release to speak with family members who might have pertinent information can be an appropriate accommodation to provide, and can be a helpful way to piece together a factual history. If you do have permission to communicate with a family member, remember that family members can have interests that are inconsistent with what your client wants. It is important to remember this as you assess the validity of the information you receive. Also, if part of your role is to obtain records, an awareness of the geographic area in which a client lived and received services can enable you to do targeted records requests that may net information about the client's history.
- If your office does telephone intakes, sometimes the telephone does not work for a client. If you have serious problems getting information from a client, there are times when meeting the client in person changes the dynamic in a positive way. This is an issue to be raised with your supervisor because there are times when clients attempt to circumvent the ordinary process applicable to other clients. While this can raise the potential need for client management strategies discussed below, the provision of an in-person meeting can be a reasonable accommodation for a phone intake office.

The most important thing to remember in your development as a client-centered interviewer is that conversation is about exchange, but in service settings, such as government service and attorney settings, there is a tendency for the professional to control the floor. Giving up some of that control initially can prove more efficient than trying to force sensitive issues into a preconceived interview structure.

III. Identifying Accommodations We Can Make

Any client seeking help, particularly for a legal problem that creates stress, can present challenges to a worker or advocate trying to provide effective service. When a client has a mental health or cognitive disability, the client may experience even greater anxiety in the interview situation than other clients. They may require more repetition to understand concepts, so meetings may take longer. They may experience some confusion. Their documents may not be organized. Use of the following basic strategies can avoid problems as you start your working relationship with a client.

- Speak slowly and use basic terms. Avoid legalese or institutional acronyms unless you define them.
- Avoid slang terms and phrases with multiple meanings.

- After the client has told their story, yes-or-no questions can help you get details clarified. Questions with a few choices, e.g., multiple-choice questions, can also be helpful.
- Provide space in the conversation. Some processing and mental health disabilities will mean that a client needs more time to process and respond to information provided.
- Find a quiet place for the meeting that has few sensory distractions.

A. General Meeting Strategies

For both management and staff, it is important to consider your environment and the resources you have available for client meetings. Often, offices are set up in a way that best services most clients, but not a client with certain sensitivities to noise, distraction, or even light. Sometimes an individual client may become distressed and you may need a different, quieter space to speak to the client or the support of another member of your staff. Find out what your office policies and resources are for dealing with these challenging situations before you find yourself in one.

For offices that are small and have limited staff, you want to consider these concerns in advance of the moment in which they arise. What policies for client emergencies does the agency have in place? When no policies are in place, unfortunate results can occur when a client is upset, such as a call to the police. When this occurs, the vulnerable client is only further disenfranchised and disadvantaged. A reasonable accommodation to build into office life might be the training of one or two employees who are responsible to step in to talk with the client one-on-one when a situation escalates.

Because initial meetings for even simple issues can require some time to interview a client and sort through documents, consider strategies for reducing both the client's anxiety in meeting with you and your concerns about taking too much time away from work during the middle of the day. If you know that a client is stressed by busy office times or disruption, schedule the meeting for a time of day when the office is quieter.

The following are some ideas for providing accommodation in the meeting context. Some of these concepts have been briefly discussed in the previous section on client-centered interviewing.

Work with the Client's Schedule: Be sensitive when scheduling client meetings. It is not uncommon for clients who take psychotropic medications to have sleep difficulties. This means that they may not sleep well in the evening and be unable to rise early in the morning. Meetings toward the end of the business day may be the answer—especially for pro bono attorneys working in large firms. The office environment is less hectic and less distracting, and you can have your client meeting without concerns that it may run over into another meeting you have scheduled.

General “First Meeting” Strategies: There are different approaches to the initial meeting, and pro bono attorneys in particular may want to think about how to use the first client meeting. You might use it as an opportunity to get all relevant documents, but do only a limited interview. You will then have the opportunity to get a sense of the client’s strengths and presentation and their perspective on the issues, and then end the meeting to allow you to review documents. When you have a better understanding of the documentary aspect of the problem, you can set a second meeting for a full interview.

Alternatively, you might feel like you want to accomplish as much as possible in the initial meeting. You will be ready to look at documents, organize your thoughts, and proceed to a rather detailed interview about the situation. If this is a strategy you prefer, remember that some clients tire easily and you may need to set more than one meeting to accomplish the results you seek. Or, the client may need to take periodic breaks, especially if the information discussed causes an emotional response.

After the initial meeting, you may find that the best strategy for getting the information you need is to prepare a detailed list of your questions and concerns. This will set the tone for the next meeting and has the added benefit of ensuring that your client knows your expectations as to what should be accomplished during the meeting.

Flexibility Helps: Whatever strategy you take in scheduling meetings, be prepared to be flexible. As stated above, some clients tire easily or can only focus for a limited amount of time. In such cases, the best-laid plans may not net the results you want. If you understand this at the beginning of the process, you will be better able to avoid the frustration you might otherwise feel from not getting as much accomplished in a meeting as you had hoped.

Build Rapport: At the beginning of any meeting, it can be helpful to building (or reestablishing) rapport and alleviating anxiety to take a few moments to let the client tell you a little about the issue or about what has been happening this week. Ask the client to summarize briefly how he got into the situation of needing your help. You can use this discussion to get a sense of your client’s focus, clarity, organization, and challenges in presenting and processing information.

Manage Expectations and Set Parameters: While you may use small talk at the beginning of your interview, it is still important to both manage your client’s expectations and set parameters early in the client relationship. Being intentional up front about your role and what you seek to accomplish in the interview and the client relationship overall helps the client understand what they should expect from the time they spend with you. Also, be clear with yourself and your client about your role. For example, if you are a lawyer, the client needs to understand the services you provide, how those services will be provided, and what you can and cannot do. Be realistic about what you are able to do and be careful about overstating possible results. While you may provide accommodations to ensure a good working relationship, this does not mean that you become the client’s social worker.

Never be afraid to set parameters and be very clear with your client about what these limits are. (See further discussion below). These can include how you will communicate (telephone, email, etc.), how often you will communicate, etc. While you will be clear about how you plan to communicate with the client, you will also be making clear how the client should communicate with you. You may need to remind the client about parameters you set during the course of your initial meeting and each time you subsequently meet. Managing the client's expectations in this way reduces your stress and enables you to serve both this client and others more effectively.

B. Communication Strategies

Communicate Regularly Or in Accordance with the Schedule You Have Provided to The Client: As with all clients, it is important to meet your commitments about the frequency and timeliness of communication. Be sure that you are realistic about when you will follow up or call the client. When you say you will call, call. When you tell a client that you will call and then fail to do so, the failure can result in heightened anxiety and a flood of telephone calls that increase may your stress. This situation is counter-productive to any working relationship.

Be Clear and Concise about What You Can Do: Be very clear in setting and managing client expectations. Sometimes clients believe that, once they have met with you about their problem, all their problems have been or will be resolved. It is important to be clear, both orally and in writing when possible, about what has been agreed to and what services will be provided, what paperwork is needed, what the timeframes are, and what the potential for delay might be.

Remember Your Role—You are Not a Therapist: While this was noted previously, it is so important to your health and well-being that it is noted again here. It is not uncommon that a client with mental health disabilities has a limited support network. It can include therapists and case managers, but the client may no longer have family members or community groups such as churches that support them. Accordingly, the fact that you are talking to the client about issues and concerns they have means that you become very important to the client. Although you may have great empathy for the client's situation, you are not the therapist or the case manager. You are a person responsible for certain tasks, and it can be useful to reiterate your role from time to time to avoid the growth of unrealistic expectations.

Be Careful in Your Language: In other words, don't make promises you cannot keep. This is good practice generally, but even more important when dealing with clients with mental disabilities. Some clients can be very literal. Don't engage in puffery or generalizations about how everything will be fine. Be clear about what your role in the process is and what you will be doing. If the client has an issue that must be submitted to a third party for consideration, be very clear about what you will be doing and that you cannot guarantee a positive result.

Useful Listening and Talking Techniques: Most clients tell their stories directly and respond to questions you ask. A few clients, however, may require redirection to stay on point. Use active listening techniques. As you listen to the story the client tells, acknowledge the information the client has shared, identify the useful and relevant information, and repeat that information back to the client as clarification; then, use your next question to keep the interview on track so that you get useful information. This is a method for redirecting the client's storytelling back to pertinent information. Sometimes it is helpful in redirecting a client to appeal to their self-interest, e.g., "I know that you have to pick up your children, so let's focus on...so you can get to school on time."

Another strategy that is useful in a situation in which you do not feel the client is hearing and acknowledging what you have told them is sometimes referred to as "broken record." At appropriate breaks in the conversation, repeat again the important information you need the client to hear until the client acknowledges to you that they have understood your point.

C. Managing Expectations and Setting Limits

Whatever your role with a client—lawyer, pro bono attorney, service worker, advocate—you have a role and certain things that you hope to be able to accomplish for a client, but you cannot fix everything. When you are clear about your role and what the client can expect from their working relationship with you, you take important steps in managing their expectations, which avoids confusion and dissatisfaction later. As part of managing expectations, it is reasonable to set limits about aspects of your relationships, e.g., when and how to communicate; this, too, is likely to be an important way to ensure a positive working relationship. The first thing to know is that most clients, including clients with mental health disabilities, respect the limits you set. Any client can abuse your time, including a client without mental disabilities. You set the tone and you set the limits—with all your clients—but it is important to communicate these clearly.

Setting Parameters: Even though you are working in a pro bono, public interest, social service, or government service setting, it is completely appropriate that clients respect your time. Setting parameters or limits for clients will only improve your effectiveness, ensure that you can help the maximum number of clients possible, and reduce the potential for burnout. To balance the parameters or limits you set with the need to provide reasonable accommodations, it is important to communicate clearly and repeatedly when working with a client to manage their expectations about how your time with them will be used, how interviews and meetings will go, how and when you will communicate, and when the matter is likely to be resolved.

Stressful Meeting Moments: Sometimes it can be very difficult to end a meeting with a client. The client may not take the obvious signals that the meeting is over. Or perhaps the client seems a bit fragile or is upset. You still have to end the meeting and move on.

A social work strategy that works well for calming a distressed client who is ratcheting up the volume and the anger level in a conversation is to talk more and more quietly and

softly. Don't try to out-scream a screamer; you'll seldom win. All you are likely to do is escalate the situation. Talking softly and letting the client get out some of their frustration can be a useful strategy.

Sometimes in frustration, an advocate will say something that the client hears as "I'm really busy and don't have any more time to spend on this." Telling a client by word or implication that you are too busy to deal with their issues is a fast way to escalate the client and cause lost time and efficiencies. Set expectations early in a meeting to avoid the frustration that leads to this type of interaction. Continue to remind the client about limits throughout the meeting. Even when you use these strategies, it is important to acknowledge in your scheduling process the potential need to schedule a second meeting.

When you know that a client is likely to become upset, take this into consideration in scheduling document drop-offs and meetings. You might decide not to let the client into your personal office, but to meet in an entry area closer to the elevator, especially if you don't anticipate the need for a long meeting.

When you have scheduled an in-office meeting but are having difficulty terminating it, one strategy is to slowly pack yourself up to leave and slowly talk the individual toward the elevator and ride down as you talk. You are eventually in the lobby and may be more easily able to end the meeting at or near the street.

Email, Telephone, Fax, Text or Mail?: Office policies vary on the appropriate means of client communication. It is so easy to communicate via email that many choose this as the first method for sending information. Email is certainly a valid communication strategy. If your office communicates via email, understand that most clients will respect email limits you set, but some clients will not. Prepare for this possibility. If you decide to communicate with a client via email, make very clear under what circumstances you want to receive email communication. Attorneys who work with clients who have mental health disabilities can tell stories of single-spaced emails that go on for pages about the litany of problems the client has. You may not want to be responsible for reading and/or responding to this kind of communication.

If you do begin to receive unsolicited emails and you do not have the time to read them and/or they do not provide information you have requested, you will want to respond quickly and clearly. If you authorized the client to communicate by email and find that communication method abused, you may decide to stop using email as a communication method. In such a case, you want to be very clear both in email and in a regular mail letter (if possible) that email communication is no longer authorized and that future emails will not be opened, but will be deleted. You will also want to make clear that email is not a method for inquiring about new problems—that is, it is not a form of intake through which potential problems will be addressed.

Perhaps you have identified the telephone as the preferred method of client communication. Most clients respect limits, but there are times when clients are very upset and will make continuous telephone calls throughout the workday. You are

probably not going to have time to respond to each call. Rather than trying to ignore the calls, make it very clear to the client that he/she may not call more often than once a day, every other day, once a week—or whatever is appropriate based on the case. Stick to those limits and eventually the client will. You have the power to set those limits. Setting them affirmatively is better than hoping the pestering calls will go away and leaving them to an assistant to address without guidance.

Faxing is another very practical method of receiving documents and necessary information. Be clear about your expectation of documents to be faxed. Clients who have access to fax machines sometimes send streams of documents that you have not requested. The good news is that you know you only have copies of client documents; you do not have originals. The bad news is that you might not want to sort through unrequested materials that delay your handling of the client's problem. Again, in these situations, it is better to deal with the situation in a direct way. This can include a firm telephone conversation about what you have authorized via fax as well as a confirmation via regular mail. Also, if the relationship has been conducted solely by telephone, this may be the time to set an in-person meeting to sort out documents, obtain a clear understanding of the facts, and set parameters for the remainder of the relationship.

Texting is such a common form of social communication that you might think this is an appropriate way to communicate with clients. Check your office policy on texting and what devices should be used. Avoid using personal devices as they can open unintended and all-hours communication with a client that can result in ineffective communication and advocate burnout. Text is often a way that case managers communicate about clients, but consider with your supervisor whether text is the appropriate way to communicate for your type of work before setting that precedent. Also, if text is to be a way that you communicate, find out what your office policy is about providing a dedicated device to be used for that purpose.

Conclusion

Most clients, whether they have mental health disabilities or not, respect the limits you set and work with you respectfully. Setting the tone and parameters of the working relationship quickly as you start working with a client is the best way to avoid wasted time and ensure a positive working relationship for both you and your client.

While there are some basic accommodations that can and should be made to ensure that you can meet the needs of a person's disabilities that cause behavioral challenges, this does not mean that you cannot set appropriate parameters for the working relationship. Failure to do so has several negative consequences. You are likely to be less efficient and spend unproductive time with the client, which results in less time for you to serve other clients. You may also be acting as an enabler. This means that you reinforce the pattern of problematic behavior the client exhibits; as a result, the client may engage in that same problematic behavior at other service venues and end up being restricted from services they need. You are also more likely to experience burnout and frustration.

Respecting your time and your client's time by providing appropriate accommodations and setting useful parameters will result in a positive working relationship. Positive working relationships improve outcomes for clients and save you time because you are efficiently managing client work to maximize the overall number of clients you are able to serve.

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