

INTERVIEWING AND CLIENT COUNSELING FOR SURVIVOR/VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

IDEAL INTERVIEW FORMAT:

Ice breaker – make the client feel at ease; develop rapport

- “Did you have any trouble finding the office? How was traffic?”

Narrative – allow the client to tell their story in their own way, uninterrupted by questions, except to prompt more disclosure.

- Minimal note taking, except for points of follow-up
- Body language – square to client, open body language, eye contact
- Reassuring comments – “That took courage,” “I admire your bravery in getting to this point,” “These situations can happen to the best of us,” etc.
- AVOID expressions of shock and horror – victim may be embarrassed, shut-down

Specifics – ask for additional detail / follow-up questions

- Try to put the narrative into a coherent timeline
- Retell narrative and ask, “Am I understanding it right?”
- Particularly ask for details on the points that must be proven at the hearing – “What’s the worst thing he’s ever done?”
- Get as specific as possible – “And where were his hands? And where were your hands?” “When you say he was fussin’ at you, what was he saying and doing? Can you act it out?”
- Ask about negative aspects of the case: “If we go to court, what’s the worst thing he might try to say about you, even if it’s not true?”
- **Don’t be afraid to ask about / discuss drug use!

Goals – what does the client hope to achieve?

- Discuss consequences and increased danger involved in filing for protective order
- Lay out options as multiple-choice scenarios, and *let client choose*
- Remind clients that **they are the world’s best expert on the respondent** and what the abuser is likely to do / how he is likely to react. The client is the best person to guess at which of the options will work best.

Follow up – explain specifically what the next steps are and when they will happen

- Will attorney contact client, or should client call the office?
- What should client do in the meantime?
- Safety planning – “Does he know where you’re staying? When you’re at work?”
- Write down what’s next

→ be careful about the client who wants you to love her

Remember your own power imbalance – Client will try to tell you what you want to hear, or what she *thinks* you want to hear. Don’t be satisfied with an easy or vague answer – be specific and emphasize that you’re not judging; we just want to make sure that when we go to court, we’re ready to answer whatever he says.

→ be prepared for the client who’s mad as hell and isn’t gonna take it anymore

After years of being bullied and pushed around, this client will push back at anything you say that isn’t what she wants to hear, sometimes irrationally. Validate feelings, but remind this client that you’re on the same team with the same goals.

WHAT NOT TO DO:

➤ Fail to Listen

- Emphasize that your time is valuable – you don't have time to listen
- Closed, skeptical body language – little eye contact, look bored
- Ask closed questions with little room for narrative
- Focus questions on legal issues, avoiding the history
- Ignore expressions of fear, explanations of why abuser is scary
- Interrupt client's goals to say, "No court is going to go for. . ."
- Avoid tough topics – e.g. client hints at sexual assault, but you ignore it and moves on to a topic that's easier to discuss, like finances

➤ Minimize Client's Experience

- Challenge client's behavior and understanding of the situation as wrong
- Jump to conclusions about the type of abuse (e.g. hitting)
- Display incredulity about client's story of what happened or client's response
- Make client feel like seeking help was a mistake (e.g. "So he hasn't done anything at all for 9 months?")
- Demand proof – "Ever called the police? Any witnesses? You see why it wouldn't be a good idea to challenge custody -- do you have *any* proof?"

➤ Blame the Victim

- Make client feel like it's her fault (e.g. "What did you do to provoke him?")
- Tell client she responded wrong (e.g. "Why didn't you call the police right away?")

➤ Make her Feel Helpless or Inadequate

- Remind client of all the struggles ahead (e.g. "Do you have a plan to get a job?" "How are you going to find a place to live?")
- Make client feel stupid (e.g. "How could you not have any idea how much he makes?")
- Overburden client (e.g. "I'm not sure how to help you without this information")
 - Ask her to contact him – potentially dangerous for her
 - Ask her to investigate on her own – potentially dangerous for her
- Emphasize the other parent's rights, and bully client into a custody arrangement
- Use legal jargon to confuse her (e.g. EPO, PPO, J&DR, *pendente lite*, *praecipe*, hearsay)
- Shove tons of paperwork for her to fill out with no explanation

➤ Fail to Present a Clear Roadmap

- End the interview without a plan for next steps
- Let client leave with no written materials, instructions, or explanations
- "If you have any questions, call my secretary."

Don't say. . .	Instead, try. . .
"No court is going to go for. . ."	"We can ask the court for that if you want, but let me explain to you why that's not likely to work."
"When was the last time he hit you?"	"Tell me about the most recent incident."
"So he hasn't done anything at all for 9 months?"	"How have things been going for the past 9 months since the incident you shared with me?"
"Ever called the police? Any witnesses? Do you have any proof?"	"It will help us tell your story to the judge if we have other evidence to go with it. Is there anyone else who knows about what happened?"
"What did you do to provoke him?"	"Was there any reason he was particularly upset that day?"
"Why didn't you call the police?"	<p>"What steps did you take to protect yourself after that happened?"</p> <p>or</p> <p>"I can understand why you'd be afraid to call the police, but the judge might wonder about it. Pretend that I'm the judge – can you talk me through why you made the decisions you did?"</p>
"I'm not sure how to help you without this information."	"Do you think there is a way you might be able to get this information without putting yourself in danger?"
"If you have any questions, call my secretary."	"I know you're going to have questions, and I want to make sure you reach someone as quickly as possible. I'm not always available, so you can call my secretary/assistant, and they'll know how to reach me."

BE AWARE OF SIGNS OF TRAUMA:

Victims/survivors of domestic violence may process information about their experiences differently as a result of trauma. They may dissociate or disengage, becoming intellectually present but emotionally absent from the discussion. This affects the way they present their experiences, and can make it look like they are “making it up.”

- Non-linear narrative
 - The client may not remember facts in a linear way. She may go off on sudden tangents or her speech may seem incoherent.
- Flat affect
 - The client may relate what would seem to be extremely emotional experiences in an emotionally detached way.
 - Her facial expression, tone of voice, and body language may seem flat.
- Blank, absent look
 - The client may develop a blank stare or an absent expression during interviews, indicating that she is dissociating.
- Missing key details
 - The client may be unable to remember what would seem to be key details of the abuse.

Supporting a client coping with trauma:

- Build trust with the client
 - Offer her the time and space to tell her own story in her own way
 - Validate her feelings throughout the process
 - Be responsive to requests for information and support
- Begin a dialogue to understand the client’s needs
 - Ask the client how you may be able to accommodate her needs.
 - Questions:
 - Is there anything I should know to help us work together better?
 - How can I accommodate what you need in this process?
 - Solutions:
 - Schedule shorter meetings or take small breaks if she has trouble remaining engaged for long periods.
 - Find an alternative meeting place if she experiences sensory overload in a busy office.
- Partner with advocates who have worked with the client
 - ☞ **Remember to have the client sign a release of confidential information first.**
 - It may be difficult to gather complete information in a short time frame from a client who shows signs of trauma.
 - If possible, work with an advocate who has a relationship with the client to gain information and context.
- Work with the client to identify coping strategies
 - Connect her to a trusted mental health resource
 - Partner with her to identify alternatives to self-harming behaviors
 - Engage in safety planning and strategizing with clients who are using alcohol or drugs