

## Frequently Asked Questions:

### Connecting with Clients

*Working with clients who have suffered torture, trauma, and/or continued stress is difficult. The following information suggests basic tips for working with clients who may be experiencing toxic stress.*

#### **Types of trauma:**

Elements that legal practitioners should to be mindful of when meeting with clients:

Overt trauma	Covert trauma
Terrorism/War • Refugee camps • Rape • Physical Abuse • Domestic Violence • Torture • Detention	Neglect • Lack of medical care • Malnutrition • Harassment, intimidations, threats • Loss of home • Separation from family • Living in hiding • Migration • Acculturation

#### **General considerations**

*Below are a few examples of logistical issues that may complicate basic case management. We recommend you are aware of your client's general life situation or ask them how to best work with any issues.*

#### **1. Transportation**

Your client may have to take multiple forms of transportation to reach the meeting location. This can not only be costly but take a lot of time and energy. If your client is not familiar or comfortable in a city getting to your office may be overwhelming. If your client has a low education level, is illiterate or does not read the English language, navigating transportation can be difficult.

#### **2. Communication**

Communication is key to preparing for a case. Many clients use WhatsApp (a downloadable application). Your client may not have access to or use an email account, or have access to a computer. S/he may not have a personal cell phone, may not be able to answer calls during work hours, or the phone line may not be safe due to family security issues.

*Communications styles vary by culture. "Yes" and "No" responses are weighted differently in different cultures. It is not uncommon for people to respond either way, when they really do not know an answer or how to respond. This may be cultural and not dishonest. Direct communication is not always well accepted or received in all cultures.*

*This information is not comprehensive. NIJC recommends consulting with a mental health professional for assistance with your client's or your mental health needs.*

### 3. Identification Documents

Your client may not have a form of identification. This can cause additional complications for travel and to enter large office buildings. Please advise your client how to access your building.

### 4. Eating and drinking

Eating is important and traditions vary across cultures and socio-economic groups. Some clients may experience stress related to access to food. Please be aware of or ask about any cultural traditions, especially during religious holidays that may involve fasting.

### 5. Child care

Some client's may need to arrange for care of dependents (children, elderly, persons with disabilities) in order to attend a meeting. Please consider familial obligations when scheduling or extending meetings.

## How to work with clients under toxic stress

### 1. Prepare

- Be aware of the space. Ask your client for any preferences.
- Does the door close? Is the room enclosed or have windows? Can people walking by observe? Should the chairs be rearranged? Is the attorney prepared with documents, copies? Have you completed expectations from the last meeting?

### 2. Beginning of the meeting: clarify expectations

- Establish general time expectations.
- Discuss confidentiality, what this means to the case, and what information will or will not be shared
- Clarify the objective of the meeting and all other meetings. What will be discussed? What will not be discussed (at this time)? Be transparent. This helps build trust.
- Introduce whoever is (or may be) in the room and why he/she is present.
- Where are the bathrooms? Does anybody want water?
- Be clear about what each person can and cannot do.



### 3. Middle of the meeting

- Give yourself time. Recognize when approaching a potentially difficult topic and let your client know you will now be asking a difficulty set of questions. Make sure to take a break as needed.
- Respect time: clients have lives too.

- Need a break? Take one. It's okay to take a break or slow down. In fact, it will likely help both you and your client.

#### **4. Ending the meeting – De-escalate and set next steps**

- Acknowledge what the client shared and thank them for sharing.
- Review what was accomplished in this meeting and how it contributes to the overall case.
- Establish clear next steps.
- Confirm contact information.
- If traumatic events were discussed, ensure the client is “back to reality.” It may help to talk about their kids’ school, what they will have for dinner, what transportation line they will take home, etc.

*For more information, see NIJC's Frequently Asked Questions: “Working with Interpreters” and “Working with Detained Clients.”*