

Trauma Response Quick Guide for Legal Settings



A practical reference tool for legal professionals working with trauma-impacted clients.

Quick Reference – Recognizing Trauma Responses

Symptom or Behavior	What It Might Look Like	What It <i>Could</i> Mean
Flat affect / little emotion	Monotone voice, blank stares, no visible reaction	Dissociation, emotional numbness
Anger or hostility	Yelling, sarcasm, demanding tone	Fight response, fear response masked as aggression
Inconsistent storytelling	Events shared in different orders, details changing	Memory impacted by trauma, not deceit
Over-apologizing	“I’m sorry” repeatedly, visibly nervous	Learned helplessness, past punishment for honesty
Silence / shutdown	No response, head down, avoids eye contact	Freeze response, fear, overwhelm
People-pleasing	Says “whatever you need,” avoids questions, quick to agree	Fawn response, masking discomfort to stay “safe”
Avoiding your calls/emails	No-shows, rescheduling, unresponsiveness	Shame, fear of bad news, being retraumatized again

What To Say Instead: Trauma-Informed Language Swaps

Common Phrase	Trauma-Informed Alternative
“You already told us this.”	“Thank you for sharing again—what you say matters.”
“Calm down.”	“You’re safe here. Take your time—there’s no rush.”
“You’re being dramatic.”	“I hear how overwhelming this has been. You’re not alone.”
“You’re not making sense.”	“I want to make sure I understand. Can we go over that together?”
“That’s not what you said last time.”	“Sometimes details come back in pieces. Let’s go through it again.”
“Why didn’t you tell us this earlier?”	“Thanks for opening up more. That takes trust.”
“You missed your appointment again.”	“We’re still here for you. Let’s find a time that works.”

Trauma-Informed Checklist for Legal Professionals

✓ Posture & Body Language

- ☐ Sit at or below eye level with the client
- ☐ Avoid sudden movements or hovering over them
- ☐ Maintain an open posture—avoid crossed arms

✓ Tone & Voice

- ☐ Speak in a calm, even tone
- ☐ Pause when needed—don't rush
- ☐ Name what's happening if someone seems overwhelmed (e.g., "I notice this feels heavy—would you like a pause?")

✓ Words & Approach

- ☐ Ask permission before discussing sensitive topics
- ☐ Normalize trauma responses ("Many people feel this way after what you've been through.")
- ☐ Clarify next steps in plain, respectful language
- ☐ Offer choices whenever possible ("Would you prefer a call or in-person meeting?")

Final Note

Trauma doesn't always look how you expect it to—and legal professionals aren't here to diagnose. But we *are* responsible for reducing harm.

The more you practice trauma-informed care, the more trust you build—and the more your clients participate in the legal process.