

5 Tips To Help You Manage Distressed Clients



**My Freedom To Thrive
resources for
Professional Wellness**



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Introduction

Whilst clients come in different shapes and sizes, some just bring out the worst in us.

These client may begin work full of enthusiasm, only to become highly belligerent. Whilst all of us have good days and bad days, these clients simply seem emotionally more difficult to manage than the norm. If you are not careful, you can suddenly find yourself dealing with unrealistic claims on your time and energy.

Distressed Clients struggle to plan, often dramatically change their minds, and struggle to follow-up on agreed decisions. Often they try to suck you into their psychological whirlwind, forcing you into roles and responsibilities that you are not trained for. If left unchecked, this interpersonal behaviour is incredibly draining.

To manage the emotional and psychological toll that Distressed Clients can cause, it is important to know the strategies you can use to minimise any potential harm. This is especially important if you are working with this type of client over a prolonged period of time.

The following tips will help you maintain your boundaries, protect your well-being and improve your working partnership with your client.



TIP 1: Know the impact of stress

Stress is a normal part of life and can be beneficial in certain situations. However, it can have serious consequences for our mental and physical health when it becomes chronic or overwhelming. As a client-facing professional it is important that understand how stress typically impacts your client.

The most important thing to know is that when someone is stressed their cognitive functioning is impaired; that is their memory, attention, concentration, and planning can be unreliable. If you have the sensation sometimes that your client isn't taking in the information you are providing, there's a good chance that you are correct.

The good news is that this is often temporary and is due to the anxiety-provoking situation they are in. You can certainly alleviate their difficulties by modifying the way you provide information.

- Always provide written follow-up – bullet points and short explanations
- Avoid or explain jargon – every industry has inside language, your client is unlikely to understand it
- Always ask your client to repeat back what you have discussed – double-check understanding
- Make sure you have a workplace communication strategy which develops multi-format, accessible information



TIP 2: Be aware of triggers

Stressful events can be caused by a variety of triggers, and it is important to be able to recognize and identify these triggers to better manage stress.

You are probably aware that being involved in any type of life changing situation is highly stressful. Remember that whilst your workplace and work language is something you are very comfortable with, for your client it will be something completely unknown.

Many clients feel overwhelmed by discussions around finances, housing, childcare and health. If you provide services in these sectors, your client will likely need extra support to understand your discussions.

- Do not hurry your client – schedule in a little bit of 'wiggle time' in case your client needs to take a short break
- Be aware that your client may have emotional reactions that seem out of proportion to what you are telling them
- Reassure your client at the beginning of any interaction that they can ask questions if they do not understand something
- If you find that your client is often over-aroused, encourage them to bring someone with them to support and reassure them
- Recognise that simply being in the OT environment can become a trigger for anxiety

TIP 3: Stay calm

When a client is anxious, they look to you to provide a sense of reassurance. However, every professional sometimes struggles to remain grounded when faced with an extremely distraught client. This is why it is important to prioritise your own well-being and create space to decompress.

Supervision or peer support is a great way to offload and be able to see alternative solutions. Often burnout and exhaustion come from having a lack of proportion about what we can cope with alone. **Reach out to your your colleagues or network for support.**



- Prioritise your own well-being and make sure you have supports in place if you are dealing with a frequently, over-anxious client
- Be aware of your own arousal level and whether a particular client causes you undue stress
- Take a few moments before a meeting with an anxious client, to relax and gain your composure – avoid starting a meeting at a rush

TIP 4: Communicate your boundaries

Clients in stressful situations place demands on professionals that are often inappropriate. If you establish long-term relationships with your client, you are likely to see them at their most vulnerable, frightened, and confused. It is important that you learn to balance your need to be caring, with your need to maintain boundaries over your time and energy.

When a client is frightened, they forget that you have a busy workload and a private life. This can lead to attempts to contact out-of-hours and strong reactions when you do not reply immediately.

You need to manage their expectations by explaining how and when they can contact you and how long your response time is likely to be. **Knowing these basic rules can often avoid a lot of unhelpful exchanges later on.**

- Spell out times you are or are not available
- Give your client a minimum reply window, e.g. 72 hours. If you reply before that is wonderful but remind them of your usual response time
- Clients under stress will not consider the impact of their stress on you and will often contact you when they are at their most distressed – try not to enter into their emergency mode.



TIP 5 : Know your limits

Working with clients who are particularly stressed is extremely demanding and can be damaging to your health if not managed consciously. Whilst every professional wants to be able to help, it is very easy for a client to expect us to work beyond our capacity.

Clients seeking support and direction in making decisions are frequently in complex social and relational situations. This often means that these clients need therapeutic interventions that are beyond your everyday client-facing pastoral care. It may be that you are the first professional to be fully aware of the range of difficulties that your client faces. This is when it is appropriate to seek additional services.

Whilst your client may be resistant to the idea of involving other professionals, **it is important not only for your client but also for your own mental health that you recognise when you are being asked to work beyond your competencies.**

- Be aware of your role and responsibilities – whilst providing pastoral care is fine, complex psychological needs should be referred on
- Consider establishing programs of clinical supervision out with your profession which can help you manage your difficult clients
- Ensure you have personal mental health support to stay healthy.

Find Out More

My Freedom To Thrive is committed to helping professionals reclaim their work and personal lives by supporting them during their career journey.



We develop a range of educational informational to encourage personal, professional and organisational health.

Our belief is that when professionals have access to the right resources and the right support, they can achieve professional health and happiness.

Our aim is to help every professional and organisation learn how to prioritise well-being, nurture resilience and take personal control of wellness by simply following easy, everyday steps.

My Freedom To Thrive would like to invite you to **join us in our mission.**

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in green ink that reads "Dr Anne".

AFBPSS,
Chartered Psychologist

