Tips for Attorneys and Advocates

- Start where the client is at
  - This means being responsive to the person in front of you in the moment they are with you, rather than just focusing your agenda/goals. Be mindful of the physical space – is it comfortable, noisy, private, who is around? Be mindful of what has happened in your client's life before court/the meeting and what will happen after (Has she gone all day without eating and is not feeling well? Is he preoccupied about going home to a chaotic and unsafe environment?) Be mindful of the system's impact on you and your client.
  - How to do it: Ask how your client is feeling and find out what is going on at present. Listen to the answers and communicate that you have heard what the client said. If you are noticing things that a client is not sharing, you can say "I can't help but notice that you seem really distracted/upset/stressed. . . . What is going on for you?"
- Be empathetic
  - This means accurately perceiving the feelings of the client and communicating understanding of these feelings to the client. You can empathize with any feelings without condoning behavior.
  - How to communicate empathy: Listen actively to what the client says, tone and implied meaning, and non-verbal communication. Reflect what the client is saying to you without adding your own judgments. Empathetic Response starters include: "I hear you saying…"; 'I sense that you are feeling…"; "Correct me if I am wrong but it seems like…"; "That sounds challenging…". Make eye contact with the client, if that seems culturally appropriate. Be present – avoid distractions like emails and phone calls during interviews.
- Validate
  - This means acknowledging that you have heard what the client has said and that what she is thinking/feeling makes sense. It is about acknowledging and showing respect for the feelings and thoughts of others.
  - How to do it: Name the feelings/thoughts that you hear the client express in a non-judgmental tone. Possible responses are: "It makes sense that you feel upset"; "I know this process is taking forever. Your frustration is totally warranted"; "You're entitled to be upset with me because I didn't call you back sooner."
- Normalize
  - This means helping the client see that he is not alone, not the first to experience this situation, and that his feeling about a situation are ok. A client may feel embarrassed/anxious about how he is reacting to an event or situation that can prevent him from taking action.
  - How to do it: Universalize the response your client is having. "I have heard from other people in similar situations about how difficult this is for them too."
- Be mindful
  - This means being mindful of your client, of yourself, of the physical space and setting, of the systems affecting your client, of the systems impact on you, of culture, of language, etc.

- How to do it: Take a few moments before reacting or answering a client question. Take time to reflect on your practice after good and not so good interactions with clients. If you notice yourself becoming upset, flustered, irritated, take a step back (and breathe!) before responding to the client.

- Be yourself
  - We all have different styles that fit our personalities and life and work experiences – authenticity is the foundation of positive relationships. Try on different approaches and find the style(s) the works for you.
  - How to do it: Be yourself. Acknowledge your feelings, preferences, expectations, fears, etc. with co-workers, supervisors, and others – though not necessarily with clients. Treat your client like you would like to be treated if you were in their shoes.
- Maintain professional boundaries
  - Don't take it personally, but be open to criticism and take responsibility for your actions. A client may vent to you and express frustration with you the same way we all do with doctors, repair people and anyone else that has bad news for us. At the same time, taking responsibility and apologizing for your actions that were harmful/hurtful is important and can go a long way.
  - Understand you are not responsible for your client's life. It is important to remember that your client's case is really not about you.
  - Be clear about expectations of your work together, about what you can and can't do, the process and timeframe.
  - Don't lie or tell clients what they want to hear. It can be very difficult to tell someone really bad news; however, you owe your client honesty. People know when you are sugar coating the truth and you will lose credibility and respect for telling them anything but the truth. Also, how can anyone make decisions about their life if they do not fully understand their options or the consequences of a decision?
  - Be mindful of transference and counter-transference. Clients will associate you with other people and experiences they have had in their lives. Similarly, some clients will remind you of other people/relationships in your life. This may manifest in a range of ways, including judgments, preferences, or intolerances. Be aware of these dynamics and how they may impact your relationship with a client.
  - Understand compassion fatigue/secondary trauma. Compassion fatigue has been talked about since 1950 (more recently discussed as secondary trauma). It is a phenomenon seen among people who spend time with and witness the stories of people who have experienced trauma. People experiencing secondary trauma may display a gradual lessening of compassion and ability to connect with others' emotions overtime, sense of hopelessness, anxiety, a pervasive negative attitude and constant stress. These feelings are experienced both in one's professional and personal life and can impact one's productivity, ability to focus, and lead to the development of new feelings of incompetency and self doubt. Having good boundaries, engaging in self-care, understanding counter transference, and having good supervision helps to protect against compassion fatigue/secondary trauma.
  - Take care of yourself!