

# Responding to Clients in Crisis: Practical Skills for Engagement and Interviewing

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## Overview of Presentation

- Introductions
- What is a crisis?
- Understanding trauma and grief
- Tips for working with clients in crisis
- How to conduct screenings and trauma informed interviews



## Predictions, Acknowledgements, and Disclaimers “PADS”

- Studying trauma, grief and crisis can be traumatizing in itself
- Self- care is important
- This is only a very tiny introduction to this field
- The amount of information to learn can be overwhelming
- Acknowledge intersectionality, and that trauma and grief, and how people experience them, can be influenced by the individual’s gender, race, class, as well as how they experience systems of care, diagnosis and treatment



**We're in a Moment of National Crisis –  
Both the Pandemic and a Racial Justice  
Uprising**



## Racial Justice

*COVID crisis has allowed us to reflect on how we do our work:*

- What does it mean to do anti-racist work?
- How do we elevate the voices of our clients? (we work for them!)
- Are we treating each client as an individual?
- How do clients feel about our services?
- How do we use our power?
- How do we share information?
- What is our role in amplifying those doing anti-racist work?
- How can we lead anti-racist work?



## Brainstorm: What is a Crisis?

Definitions?  
Examples?



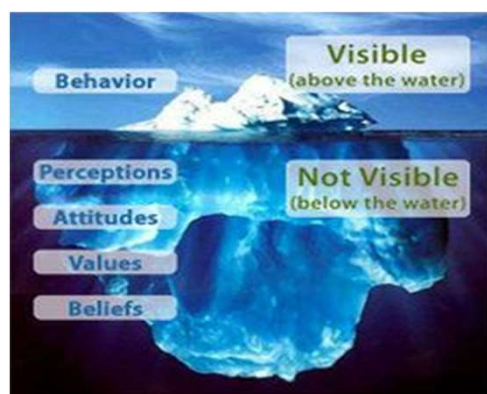
## Trauma Definitions

“The word *trauma* is used to describe experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm people’s ability to cope, leaving them powerless. Trauma has sometimes been defined in reference to circumstances that are outside the realm of normal human experience. Unfortunately this definition does not always hold true. For some groups of people, trauma can occur frequently and become part of the common human experience.” (Center for Nonviolence and Social Justice)

“In addition to terrifying events such as violence and assault, we suggest that relatively subtler and insidious forms of trauma – such as discrimination, racism, oppression, and poverty – are pervasive and, when experienced chronically, have a cumulative impact that can be fundamentally life-altering.” (Institute for Family Professionals)



## Trauma Iceberg



A person’s history and emotional/relational foundation is represented by the part of the iceberg that is underwater and not visible.



# Rethinking The Iceberg of Trauma

By Jen Alexander

- "Collectively, we (meaning a lot of us) have not adequately been confronting the historical trauma and ongoing marginalization of groups that directly cause trauma and also perpetuate power differentials and systems of oppression, which then make individuals and families even more vulnerable to future traumas. We cannot be trauma-informed without fighting these injustices..."
- "We must go deeper into the iceberg, and thus, wider (with our understanding). Ask not just 'What might have happened (or be happening) to you?' But also, 'What has contributed to what might have happened (or be happening) to you?' And, 'How might my biases and assumptions be problematic?'"



## Bruce Perry's Brain States

Brain State	Brain Part	Thinking	Sense of Time
Calm	Prefrontal Cortex	Abstract/ Creative	Future
Alert	Subcortex	Concrete	Week/ Day
Alarmed	Limbic	Emotional	Hours/ Minutes
Fearful	Midbrain	Reactive	Minutes/ Seconds
Terror	Brainstem	Reflexive	Loss of Time

Dr. Bruce Perry, [www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org)



## How Trauma Manifests For Clients in Crisis

- What professionals should know about the effects of trauma on clients:
- Clients may resort to less healthy coping strategies, such as using alcohol or drugs
- Clients may have a hard time understanding and controlling their emotional responses
- Clients may have a pervasive sense of loss of control (especially after the removal of their children in the dependency context)
- Clients may find it difficult to trust others
- Clients may become numb or shut down – this can indicate the presence of trauma reminders

National Child Traumatic Stress

Network <http://centerforchildwelfare2.fmhi.usf.edu/kb/fosterparents/ParentsWTraumaHx-GuideForFP.pdf>



## Understanding Grief and Loss



# Types of Losses

**Bereavement loss** (*death loss*)- loss of a family member or loved one through death

**Ambiguous loss**- Loved one is physically or psychologically absent (Boss, 2010)

- Illness/loss of health
- Loss of a physical ability

**Subtle or less obvious losses**

- Loss of identity
- Move to a new home



## Grief

Everyone grieves differently

The way people experience grief varies depending on the following:

- Pre-existing losses, mourner's personality
- Supportive resources, secondary losses, acceptance of grief, mental health, coping style, age, developmental life stage

Styles of grieving

- Intuitive
  - Heart grievors, affective domain, desire to share inner experience, desire to be heard, crying, heart grievors
- Instrumental
  - Head grievors, cognitive domain, desire for action, discuss problems, feeling muted

No set time frame



# Disenfranchised Grief

**Grief** resulting from a **loss** that is hidden, not socially supported, openly acknowledged, or publicly mourned (Bowman, 1999)



## Disenfranchised Grief

1. The loss isn't seen as worthy of grief (ex. non-death losses)
2. The relationship is stigmatized (ex. partner in an extramarital affair)
3. The mechanism of death is stigmatized (ex. suicide or overdose death)
4. The way someone is grieving is stigmatized. (ex. the absence of an outward grief response or extreme grief responses)

Source: <https://whatsyourgrief.com/64-examples-of-disenfranchised-grief/#:~:text=Disenfranchised%20grief%20is%20a%20term,socially%20sanctioned%20or%20publicly%20recognized%20%26%20%2D%2D>





## Disenfranchised Grief

1. Grieving family separation due to foster care
2. Grieving someone who is incarcerated
3. Moving/loss of community
4. Loss of independence
5. Loss of 'lifestyle' (losing financial means, getting clean from drugs/alcohol)
6. Death of someone in a 'stigmatized' peer group (a gang member, someone else using or selling drugs, etc).

Source: <https://whatsyourgrief.com/64-examples-of-disenfranchised-grief/#~:text=Disenfranchised%20grief%20is%20a%20term,socially%20sanctioned%20or%20publicly%20mourned%E2%80%9D.>



## Grief Reactions

Clients might...

- Feel like they are "going crazy"
- Have difficulty concentrating
- Feel sad or depressed
- Be irritable or angry (at the deceased, oneself, others, higher powers)
- Feel frustrated or misunderstood
- Experience anxiety, nervousness, or fearfulness
- Feel like they want to "escape"
- Experience guilt or remorse
- Be ambivalent
- Feel numb
- Lack energy and motivation

Source: <https://cmhc.utexas.edu/griefloss.html>



## Tips for Working with Clients in Crisis



## Best Practices for Initial Contact

- Open the conversation with your role and introduction to organization
- Assess Safety of caller. A caller may not always be able to tell you if they are safe to talk.
  - Lookout for coaching, caller is on public transportation, hesitancy to answer questions
- Gather information to assess needs, make appropriate referrals if needed.
- Setting realistic expectations of what you can and can't do
- Consider what brain state the client might be in - are they calm or are they in fight or flight mode?



## Brainstorm

What are some examples of calls that were difficult to handle during the initial contact?



## Safety and confidentiality for callers

- Assuring confidentiality
- Confirming what the information gathered will be used for
- Asking if contact information is safe: Address, emails, phone numbers



## Issue Spotting

- Tapping into social worker's expertise to support clients
- Clients may be dealing with stigma surrounding mental health and substance use disorder among other barriers



## The Problem with asking about "Domestic Violence"

- Not everyone will identify as a survivor of Domestic Violence
  - Has this person ever threatened to harm you?
  - Are you afraid or have you ever been afraid of this person?
  - Has this person every withheld money from you?
- Find out what steps the caller has taken, if any.
  - Taking *legal* steps to separate from the perpetrator
  - Taking *non legal* steps to separate from the perpetrator



## Environment

- Your space - provide access to poster/resources/literature that send positive messages that the current crisis is just one of many issues that client may be experiencing and there are services to support them
- Client space - safety plan with client prior to your first contact around what form of communication is assessable, private, and safe: phone, Zoom, text, email. Have an exit plan if the environment becomes unsafe for the client.



## Preparation

- Preparation Learn about the dynamics of the current crisis
- Be aware that current crisis is one area of the client's life, not who they are as a person
- Be aware of the specific needs/risks that come with how this client's social identity may impact their access to community services
- Be aware of the inherent power dynamic in the client/attorney relationship
- Be aware that the legal system may be just one of many systems that client is navigating
- Know about the current crisis resources in Philadelphia and learn how to make a referral



## Do's

- Eye contact - take your cue from the client
- Pay attention to and be aware of nonverbal cues displayed by the client (body language, appearance, tone of voice)
- Be aware of your own nonverbal cues
- Check in with them - are you ok?
- Client may be overwhelmed and need a break for a drink of water or whatever soothes them
- Allow time for client to vent emotions. Crying is a release, not a sign of weakness. Have tissues on hand if you are working on site



## Don't's

- Do not assume anything about the client based on their appearance or demeanor
- Do not make negative comments about those involved in the client's current crisis
- Don't make them feel guilty for taking one step at a time
- Don't judge their decisions
- Do not make promises you cannot keep



## Skills Needed

### Listening...

- Non-judgmental Reflective listening - clarifying what the client has said by repeating what you heard them say, rephrasing statements, and reflecting ideas and values
- Asking questions
  - Ask direct questions, explaining why you are asking those questions esp about children
  - Do not pressure the client and assure them that you ask everyone these questions. Accept their answer, even though it may not make sense to you right now.
  - Explain confidentiality - your conversations with client as well as your work products are confidential



## Responding Appropriately

- Validate the client's experience Respond by giving supportive non-judgmental messages "this must be challenging for you but you are doing a good job, you don't deserve to be hurt no matter what"
- Thank them for sharing
- Acknowledge your limitations as well as those of the legal system
- Be clear about your role in this process



## Safety Planning

- Understand that safety planning is a process, not a product
- It should build on what the client has already been doing to stay physically and emotionally safe during the current crisis
- If there is a PFA or other restraining order involved, understand that it is a tool and just one part of the client's overall safety plan. It is not a guarantee of safety.



## One More thing.... Self-care Power/powerlessness dynamic

- Power/powerlessness dynamic
- Your role is to empower your clients with legal information and advocacy, not to fix them
- Be honest about what you can/cannot do for clients know what your personal boundaries are
- Replenish yourself





## Role Play

Scene: It's 15 minutes before an emergency custody hearing, and lawyer and client are talking for the first time because the lawyer couldn't reach client. Client is a mom and her 2 kids were removed after she gave birth to a new baby and tested positive for cocaine.



## Break out rooms

What went wrong?

What did the lawyer do that was effective or ineffective?

What would have made the interview better/ what could the attorney have done instead?

What interview skills might you have used in this case?



## Sharing back

Anything you'd like to share back, either in the chat or unmute yourself



## References/Resources

- **Harvard Center for the Developing Child**  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNNsN9IJkws&list=PLuKMerO1zya\\_3krFpcOKgaeB2\\_2zQgYua&index=14](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNNsN9IJkws&list=PLuKMerO1zya_3krFpcOKgaeB2_2zQgYua&index=14)
- Many concepts and diagrams from the free trauma courses through **Lakeside Global Institute** - <https://lakesidelink.com/>
- **Grief and Loss** <https://cmhc.utexas.edu/griefloss.html>
- **Examples of Disenfranchised Grief** <https://whatsyourgrief.com/64-examples-of-disenfranchised-grief/#:~:text=Disenfranchised%20grief%20is%20a%20term,socially%20sanctioned%20or%20publicly%20mourned%E2%80%9D.%9D>
- **Support for Survivors of Domestic Violence:** Women In Transition - Lifeline Telephone Counseling Mon-Fri 9am - 5 pm 215-751-1111.  
You can refer clients when the current crisis involves domestic violence. You can also call yourself for information on how to best support your clients who have been traumatized by domestic violence.
- Legal Assistance: Philadelphia legal Assistance Family Law Hotline: Mon-Thurs 9:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. 215-981-3838



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