# Navigating Difficult Conversations with Newcomers

When working with newcomers, service providers often need to engage in conversations on sensitive and challenging topics. This guide accompanies Switchboard's webinar and provides context and tips for calm, effective, and trauma-informed conversations with clients.

## Introduction

Service providers regularly find themselves struggling to communicate matters out of their control to clients, who can feel disappointed that life in the U.S. does not meet their expectations. Although service providers are not responsible for these challenges, they often serve as the messengers. Economic challenges can feel particularly sensitive to clients, as they are tied to feelings of self-worth and dignity. Meanwhile, providers are managing their own stressors, including large caseloads, prolonged exposure to clients' trauma, and burnout.

## Trauma-Informed Care in Difficult Conversations

Trauma-informed care (TIC) is crucial in navigating difficult conversations with clients. It helps to build trust, restore safety, and minimize re-traumatization. [1] Applying TIC principles improves engagement in services and enhances client outcomes, **fostering safe, supportive environments for both clients and the staff serving them.**

Below, we detail how to implement TIC principles by establishing a safe setting, demonstrating transparency and trustworthiness with clients, and elevating client voice and choice.

[1] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2026, February). *SAMHSA's trauma-informed approaches and programs*. https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence/trauma-informed-approaches-programs

To learn more about **trauma's effect on refugees and the fundamentals of trauma-informed care,** refer to Switchboard's related resources, such as [Trauma-Informed Care: A Primer for Refugee Service Providers].

### Establishing an Environment of Safety

Creating a safe, calm environment for conversations you anticipate being difficult can help mitigate tensions. Establishing a safe setting from the outset also helps restore clients' **sense of power and control**.

Here are some tips to set up safe spaces when meeting with clients:

- **Ensure the room is clean and private.** Is the room in good order, or does it have toys scattered from the last meeting with a family? Will the room be available for the duration of your meeting, or might you be interrupted during a tense moment? Reserve the space for the full scheduled time, including 10 minutes before the start time (if possible) to prepare for the client's arrival.
- **Minimize a potential audience.** Having onlookers can quickly escalate a situation and make everyone feel unable to communicate clearly and safely. Make sure you have a fully private space.
- **Consider seating arrangements.** Is there adequate seating for everyone participating in the meeting, with appropriate physical distance? Sometimes, if you are seated behind a desk, a client may feel they are in trouble or being interrogated. If possible, arrange chairs beforehand to foster an environment of collaboration and mutuality (e.g., in a circle.).
- **Offer a glass of water or tea.** When possible, ask if your clients would like a beverage or to use the restroom before getting started. This can help create a safer and more mutual tone.
- **Show care by checking in.** Thank the client for taking time to meet with you. You can ask, "How was your bus ride over?" "How do you feel today?" or "Is there anything you need before we start?"

These suggestions also help interactions be **safe for service providers.** They create better rapport even during difficult conversations.

For tips on supporting clients through remote case management, refer to Switchboard's guide Promoting Client Safety and Security in Virtual Settings.

### Demonstrating Transparency and Client Choice

As you transition to the topic at hand, reduce the client's uncertainty about your meeting by establishing parameters. Review the agenda and shared expectations, providing clear information such as:

- Your role and scope of your work
- What you will be discussing
- How long you will be meeting
- What information they will have by the end of the session
- What documentation you will provide
- What next steps might entail

**Example statements to demonstrate transparency and trustworthiness:**

"Let me briefly tell you the purpose of our meeting and what we will cover."

"All the information I'm giving you will be provided in writing in your language, and you can ask for reminders at any point."

"When we're done, you can review the documents at home and come back with any questions at our next meeting."

At this point, **it is helpful to acknowledge that the conversation may be difficult or sensitive.** This helps validate and normalize a variety of emotional responses. Remind clients that if they need a break, they can ask to pause the conversation. **Assure them you understand this situation is difficult** and that you and your agency are here to support them throughout the process. All these gestures and statements help remind clients you are on their side and that they have voice and choice in the conversation and next steps.

## Attending to Your Own Response

Before you can address clients' emotions, reactions, and needs, **you first need to attend to your own emotional state and communication**.

### Notice your own reactions. Ask yourself:

- **What does my body feel like?** Any physical tension or rapid heartbeat?
- **What thoughts am I having?** Are they negative or positive? Is my mind racing?
- **How is my behavior changing?** Am I less or more patient? Distracted or focused?

If you determine you are stressed or dysregulated, you can start using these coping tools.

### Stay calm and practice co-regulation.

**Co-regulation** is a process by which two people support the calming of each other's nervous systems. Individuals impacted by trauma often struggle with emotional regulation, or the ability to return to "calm" in the face of intense emotions. Co-regulation can allow service providers to model how they manage stress and their own emotions during difficult conversations, which can help clients de-escalate their own tension and cope with the situation at hand.[2]

Imagine a time when you were in the presence of an angry or anxious person: how did your body feel? Now think of a time when you were around a relaxed individual. What was that experience like? Ultimately, the only thing you have control over is your own responses. Strive to create a calming presence, which can be sensed and reflected by the client. Though staying calm can be challenging, using simple tools can help manage your body's stress response:

- **Slow breathing.** When stressed, the nervous system sends signals to your body to take quick, shallow breaths. To counter this message and regulate your emotional response, take deep breaths to send an opposite, calming signal to your brain and body that you are okay.
- **Verbal self-reassurance.** Think to yourself or even whisper reassuring statements, such as, "Everything will be okay," or "I am safe."
- **Peripheral vision.** When you feel stressed or threatened, the nervous system sends signals to your eyes to narrow your vision. To counter this natural occurrence, open your vision, using your periphery as a guide. *See box on the right for details.*

## Practicing slow breathing

Deep breaths help your body return to calm. Find a comfortable place to sit up straight, and try one of these breathing techniques:

**Count to three.** Take a slow breath in through the nose counting 1, 2, 3. Exhale through the mouth counting 1, 2, 3. Repeat at least three times to help you refocus.

**4-7-8 breathing.** Exhale fully. Inhale for a count of four, hold your breath for seven, and exhale for eight. Repeat for a few cycles.

**The Butterfly Hug.** After a difficult conversation, you can take a few minutes to check in with yourself and return to calm using this breathing and movement exercise. Hug yourself with your arms over your chest and your hands on your upper arms. Tap your hands gently, alternating in a soothing rhythm. Breathe slowly and deeply, perhaps using one of the breathing exercises above. Focus your attention on the comfort of your own arms. Continue for a few minutes. When ready, gently release your arms and rest your hands in your lap, breathing deeply.

## Unlocking peripheral vision

Take a moment now to look straight ahead. Hold up each hand in front of you and slowly move each hand backwards until they are aligned with your ears. You should see them on the edges of your vision. You can now soften your gaze to focus more on your fingers and open your vision wider, like looking at the sunset on the horizon.

Next time you notice you are stressed at work, practice opening your vision, looking up from your screen, and seeing the entire space around you. Take a deep breath, observe with your peripheral vision, and relax your shoulders, sinking into your chair.

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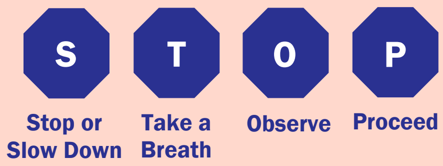
[2] Murray, D. W., Rosanbalm, K., & Christopoulos, C. (November, 2016). *Self-regulation and toxic stress Report 4: Implications for programs and practice* (OPRE Report # 2015-97). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/acf_report_4_final_rev_11182016_b5082_0.pdf.

### Mindfulness: STOP




**A simple acronym** for a tense or overwhelming situation is **STOP**, like the traffic sign, reminding us to:

**Stop** or Slow Down—most situations are not emergencies.

**Take** a Breath—practice and model calm.

**Observe** your body, thoughts, and surroundings. Finally, when ready:

**Proceed**—mindfully and more regulated.

It is useful to practice first when you are not stressed and in a safe, neutral setting. Notice how your body reacts and changes. Then you can apply these tools when you face stress, having already "rehearsed."

### Silence is okay.

Silence can feel uncomfortable or like a sign that a conversation is going badly, especially if you are not used to it. Instead, try to **reframe silence as time and space to calm down, reflect, and co-regulate.**

### Consider your body language.

Like emotional co-regulation, calm body language can set a respectful tone and enable more productive conversations. Think of a time when someone communicated anger or stress through their body language. Crossing your arms or closing off your body can signal anger or unwillingness to engage, even if unintended.

Try to maintain open, balanced posture, and assess your location relative to the client. Are you too close, crowding their personal space and possibly making them feel threatened? Are you too far away or sitting at an elevation that might make them feel diminished?

For more on nonverbal cues, refer to Switchboard's tip sheet [Nonverbal Communication & Safety Cues].

### Keep your wording simple and respectful.

Try to use clear and simple language to reduce misunderstanding, especially in conversations interpreted across languages. Always maintain professional courtesy and take a break if it has become difficult for you or the client to use respectful language.

### Consider your paraverbals.

People not only communicate with words but also with **paraverbals**: the tone, volume, and pacing of speech. Think about how you might say "what" or "okay" in different contexts, and how differently those simple words could be received based on your delivery.

### Ask reflective and open-ended questions.

Try to remain open to the client's point of view, emotions, and questions. Reflect to the client that you are listening to them, then paraphrase what you heard to make sure you understood. You can respond by saying:

- "I understand that what you're saying is _____. Is that right?"
- "I'm not sure what you mean when you say _____. Can you help me understand better?"
- "Thank you for explaining _____. That gives me clarity. Is it okay if we move to the next step?"

This helps clarify client intentions, ensure mutual understanding, and make space for [de-escalation.]

## Strategies Before, During, and After Difficult Conversations

### Seek supervisor support.

Staff should never feel alone in their work. If you are overwhelmed, stuck, or concerned for your or others' safety, ask for support from your supervisor. If you anticipate a difficult conversation, you can invite your manager to the meeting before it begins.

You might inform the client: "I want to make sure I support you the best I can. I think it would be helpful to have my supervisor answer some of your questions." If a conversation becomes difficult in the moment, you might say: "I want to be sure I'm giving you the correct information. I am going to step away to confirm."

### End the conversation and reschedule.

If you believe that the client is having difficulty processing the information or you do not feel comfortable with their responses, it may be appropriate to end the conversation. For example, you could say, "It can be difficult to take all this information in during one sitting. Would it be helpful to take a break and schedule a follow-up conversation?" Or if the client is overwhelmed and the conversation is no longer productive, you could say, "You are understandably upset, and this discussion is no longer productive. Let's find a different time for us to revisit this."

It is also important to pause if you (the service provider) cannot de-escalate, stay calm, or act professionally. For more tools on responding to escalation or crises, read Switchboard's guide [Preventing Crises and De-escalating Difficult Situations with Newcomer Clients.]

### Set appropriate boundaries when necessary.

Having difficult conversations includes setting boundaries. **Boundaries** ensure that you are only supporting clients where you have the skills, bandwidth, and professional training to do so. Clients may ask you to go above and beyond your scope of work, or you may feel compelled to do so if they are struggling. However, it can cause more harm than good to overextend yourself or try to support clients in an area where you do not have the resources or skills. Boundaries ultimately help empower clients and create sustainable work practices for staff.

To set a boundary with a client clearly and respectfully, **validate the client's concern, set the limit clearly, provide an explanation of why the boundary exists, and offer an alternative.**

### Make referrals when helpful or necessary.

Even if a difficult conversation has gone well and boundaries are respected, it can still be best to refer the client to a different or additional service or agency to help them receive the support they need. Being referred to other services or agencies can be stressful for clients, especially when considering stigma or negative previous experiences in asking for help. It is best to accompany the client through a referral—answering questions and providing information, directly introducing them to new providers, and following up where possible. For more, see Switchboard's tip sheet on effective referrals in refugee service provision.

### Boundary-Setting Example

**"I'm hearing that finding a new job is important to you and your family. Unfortunately, I cannot help with that because that is not part of my role or professional knowledge. I would be happy to refer you to my colleague in employment services."**

**To learn more about setting professional boundaries in refugee service provision, watch Switchboard's webinar Creating Balance in Case Management.**

## Having Difficult Conversations Across Cultures and Languages

### Communicating Across Cultures

It is important to explore clients' relevant cultural norms and expectations, particularly around sensitive topics. At the same time, it is essential for you to approach each client as an individual. Aim to **balance cultural awareness with respect and curiosity for each client's unique experience.**

Learning culturally appropriate greetings and expectations around physical space can help set conversations up for success. Consider whether common behaviors—such as handshakes—will communicate your intentions respectfully. For example, some clients may prefer no physical contact, particularly between men and women, or they may expect shoes to be removed when entering their home.

Asking open-ended questions can help you understand what feels respectful to the client and whether certain topics may be especially sensitive.

### Working with Interpreters

For information on working with interpreters, refer to Switchboard's resources Introduction to Working with Interpreters, Overcoming Challenges in Interpretation, and Scripts for Working with Interpreters. Here are some specific tips:

### Before your meeting:

- **Identify the appropriate language and any specific dialect needs of the client.** This is even more crucial when you know you will be discussing difficult or sensitive topics. A client's country of origin or biodata may not reflect the language they use most comfortably, so confirm this in advance.
- **Keep in mind that interpretation makes conversations longer** (so that interpreters can convey all the information with enough time for questions). Schedule adequate time for interpreted conversations and be open to scheduling a follow-up session if needed.
- **To the extent possible, choose an interpretation option that fits the context and available resources**. In-person meetings can be helpful for difficult conversations, as they allow for clearer communication and emotional support. When appropriate, discuss interpretation options with the client in advance to support comfort and privacy.
- **If possible, meet with the interpreter before the scheduled meeting with the client.** A pre-meeting with the interpreter gives you a chance to give them context on the sensitivity of the meeting. It also offers an opportunity to learn from their expertise, such as common nonverbal communication cues or words and phrases that may indicate distress.

### At the start of your meeting:

- **Explain the interpreter's role.** Introduce the interpreter and explain their purpose. To maintain the trust and rapport you have already established, clarify that this is still a service provision meeting between you and the client.
- **Reinforce confidentiality.** Remind clients that all information discussed is confidential, and ensure they understand that the interpreter is bound by that same privacy policy. You can say, "No one present will discuss the contents of this meeting with anyone else, unless you give consent or if someone is a danger to themselves or others." Refer to Switchboard's Client Rights and Responsibilities and Fundamentals of Mandatory Reporting guides for more on confidentiality.
- **Provide a framework for successful interpretation.** Explain that the conversation will involve frequent pauses so the interpreter can convey your message thoroughly. Ask the client if they can also pause after every few sentences to ensure accurate interpretation.
- **Create space for additional critical information or clarification.** Make sure the client knows they can ask to stop or clarify with you or with the interpreter at any point. While interpreters can sometimes help clarify misunderstandings, they must not add their own opinions. Refer to Switchboard's course Basic Protocols and Practical Skills for Interpreting in Newcomer Services to help train interpreters.

## Conclusion

Difficult conversations with refugee clients are an inevitable part of this challenging and rewarding work. Yet these interactions do not have to hurt your working relationships with clients or lead to negative outcomes. By applying trauma-informed care principles, approaching conversations mindfully, and attending to the client's experience, cultural context, and language needs, you can navigate difficult conversations more respectfully and effectively. These practices support better outcomes for clients and a safer, more sustainable work environment for staff.

## Relevant Switchboard Resources

*Navigating Difficult Conversations with Clients (2025)*
This archived webinar offers guidance on using a trauma-informed approach in difficult conversations.

*Navigating Sensitive Health Conversations with Clients*
(2024) This guide shares practical tips for sensitive health conversations with newcomer clients.

*Managing Newcomers' Housing Expectations (2023)*
This blog post outlines important facts about housing in the U.S. and strategies for communicating and setting expectations about housing with newcomers.

*Job Development in Times of Economic Hardship*
*(2021)* This guide offers suggestions and program examples you can reference as you and your clients navigate challenges in the employment search process.

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