

The Difficult Client

It's a fact of life that we sometimes get a client who is ill-natured, demanding, or just plain unpleasant to deal with. Our challenge is not to take it personally and avoid getting into negative countertransference.

We don't know what is going on in people's lives, or what may have gone on in the past. Bear in mind that a client who seems difficult may be acting out of fear based on past trauma. An intake form or interview is not the place to ask if a client has ever been sexually or physically abused, for example; that's being invasive into their personal life. Although listing PTSD as a condition on your intake form is acceptable, some people who suffer from it may be hesitant to reveal that. Their demeanor may indicate that it is hard for them to relax and feel safe. They may be worried that you are not going to be attentive enough to their care, and if you fall into the trap of responding to them with irritation, they'll feel they were right about that. It's best to respond with kindness. A simple "Is there anything I can do to make you feel more comfortable? I want this to be a good experience for you. I hope you will let me know if there's anything else I can do to make you feel more at ease." Your honesty and compassion may help the client trust that you have the best intentions towards them.

Some clients are just difficult people, and that's not about you. A woman once called my office when I was the owner of a multi-therapist practice, and her first question was "Do you have anyone there who is a good therapist?" I responded that all our therapists were well-trained and experienced. She said "I knew you would say that. I've read your propaganda." She ripped through about four staff members before I referred her to another office. She kept saying "I know a good massage when I get one," but she couldn't explain exactly what she thought constituted a good massage.

You can't please all of the people all of the time. If you know that you are doing the best you can to relieve clients of stress and/or get them out of pain, and are attentive to their needs as far as communication, pressure, and comfort, that's all you can do. In spite of your best efforts, it is sometimes necessary to say "I'm sorry that you're not happy with my work. Perhaps my style of bodywork isn't what you're looking for. I can give you the names of some other good therapists in the area."