

How to Calm Down a Client

I've recently was on the phone with a client, and to sum it up, he's a bit stressed out and wound up. I could barely talk to the phone with him without him digressing and basically going off on how stressed out and overwhelmed he is - mostly because of personal issues, but a little to deal with business issues. And it seems like me telling him about laws and regulations that he needs to follow just sent him over the edge this morning, so he kind of melted into a puddle. Now I'm feeling all stressed out and bad because I feel bad for my client's personal issues, which don't have anything to do with what he hired me for, but is nonetheless affecting his dealings with me. What techniques do you use to get a client to be quiet, calm down and listen?

Listen, respond, relate to them and then bill for the call at my standard rate per our retainer agreement fee schedule. Conversations seem to get shorter after that. Go figure.

Charles E. Yow, II, Alabama

Here are some things that I've tried, with varying levels of success:

- communicate in writing
- wait several hours before responding to his emails, unless there is an emergency
- remain calm
- remember that client's problems are client's problems and your problems are your problems, and sometimes it helps a client to talk about their problems
- keep the meter running, and remind them of that as appropriate
- listen and try to figure out what the real issue is

Recently I had a client who was really wound up about some issues, and I told him I was happy to take the actions he requested, BUT: he needed to remember we were NOT fighting over millions of dollars, or even thousands, but hundreds of dollars. Possibly tens of dollars. Basically, it was costing him more to vent at me than it would to simply pay what the other side was asking. He calmed down after that and we were able to find out what his real objectives were, which had little to do with money.

Russell D. Gray, Utah

Start talking very quietly to him, and slowly and deliberately. He has to quit kvetching so he can hear you, and just toning it down a little seems to be a great start.

Depending on how well I know a client, I've been known to threaten to come to their house and sit on them if they don't pay attention. That usually makes them laugh and then they start listening.

Marilou, a nonlawyer who always gets the difficult ones

As I tell my clients I'm a lawyer not a therapist. I sometimes get quite brusque. I tell them get a therapist it's cheaper. Besides I went to Widener not Hogwarts. Of course if you pay a big enough retainer you can waste you money but, left I don't have the time nor do I want the emotional abuse.

John Davidson, Pennsylvania

Listen and then listen some more.

If that still does not work, communicate via email or letter when necessary.

It also helps to send them a bill for the "listening" part - they soon learn to pour out their grief without a good reason. And, just time. If a legal issue can wait, then just leave the client alone to deal with his/her issues. Discuss the legal issues later.

Tom Crane, Texas

if you are really interested I would suggest that you read up on Dr. Marshall Rosenberg's work on non violent communication (NVC). It's basically an attempt to create a simple communications framework that addresses the work of Maslow and Carl Rogers regarding human needs.

I think that traditional NVC is highly flawed and makes you sound stilted and robotic. However it is extremely useful in remembering that all people are just trying to have basic human needs fulfilled that are common to all of us. We all want to feel safe, happy, fulfilled etc. It's just that sometimes we don't use the best strategies to get there.

If you can identify the underlying need that the client feels is missing and ask him about that need e.g. "So you would like some more certainty about this matter?" or "I'm guessing you would like a little peace on this issue" it takes an extra minute or so but it goes a long way towards calming people down because they "feel felt" (for lack of a better term) instead of them feeling that they are being handled.

Ken Forman, Florida

Sometimes they just need you to listen to them, particularly if there is litigation involved. If it's interfering with your representation of them, you can send preemptive "status" emails but sometimes, frankly, they're just scared and they need to feel like they're not in the legal mess/legal issues world alone. I try to tell my clients, particularly when they're anxious about something (such as when they've been served with a complaint and summons) that at this point, no one's taken anything away from them and then I tell them as stressful as it is, most of my clients who have gone through the stress of litigation feel much better afterwards because they did something really stressful and scary and survived. The trick is to believe it and not to patronize them about it. But if we can just remember that they are afraid, it seems to help.

Ann Penners Bergen

Since nobody beat me to it:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNkpIDBtC2c>

Notwithstanding the foregoing, I have been told by numerous prospects and clients that just speaking with me has a calming effect. (I am available for hire.)

YMMV,
-Rick
Richard J. Rutledge, Jr., North Carolina

The basic skill that you are looking for is "de-escalation." Think back to things that other people have done when you are stressed, that have either helped to calm you or have escalated your ire. A good example maybe, think about interactions with customer service or customer support. What have the good ones done to de-escalate the situation, what have the bad ones done to drive you crazy?

These are the principles you want to use and employ when your clients are anxious/angry or just processing with you. Others have pointed out that we make quite expensive therapists; the one area where I would diverge from that advice is that I would suggest you should probably take the lead in identifying the things that you can help with, and the things you can't fix for them. "OK, I hear you worrying about A, B and C. I understand that the more overwhelming it seems, the harder it is to think about the issues in categories. I can help you with A. We can discuss strategies for B, which is related to A. C is not really something I am going to be able to help you resolve, but it is something that you might want to discuss with _____."

Also, the more you can reduce information to "bullet points" the easier it will be for someone to digest it. Be positive, be encouraging, let your client know that it is your job to help make the legal stuff easy so they can deal with the other stuff. And then do it. If the directions were complex, follow up with a short, bullet-point summary of what they need to do. In order. At a 4th grade reading level, if possible. Anxiety disrupts cognitive function in amazing ways.

Stephanie Hill

I actually have a therapy license and gave it up to practice law. Now I can say "stop whining" without a complaint to the office of professional regulation. Maybe it was years of dealing with other people's trauma, but I have exactly zero desire to deal with that. I cut it off pretty quickly.

Michelle Kainen, Vermont
