

Understanding Our Clients

Mental health

What do I need to understand to work more effectively with clients who are experiencing mental ill-health?

- Mental ill-health can create barriers to economic and social inclusion as well as discrimination. These may make different aspects of life more challenging but clients experiencing mental ill-health are often highly resilient and resourceful. People experiencing mental ill-health need support, but their illness is not their identity.
- People who have mental ill-health or experience symptoms may experience barriers to advocating for their needs. Legal Aid NSW must work harder to ensure client needs are heard and respected.
- People with mental ill-health or those with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities are disadvantaged in their access and meaningful engagement with the criminal justice system. Legal Aid NSW lawyers must make sure that we more clearly explain concepts in a way that is more accessible to clients with diverse needs.
- Clients with mental ill-health should be treated respectfully with active listening in a nonjudgmental way. A diagnosis does not define a person and clients should always be given choices to pursue their own vision of a fulfilling life -even if symptoms of mental ill-health occur in the future.

Support services for non-legal issues – referral options

Online referral databases

These online databases may also assist you to find appropriate non-legal services for your client.

- [WayAhead Directory](#) – online database used to find local services, to make referrals and access mental ill-health information and resources.
- [Ask Izzy](#) – search over 350,000 services to find housing, meals, healthcare, counselling, legal advice, addiction treatment and more.
- [Data Diction LINCS](#) – LINCS is used by almost all councils in the Sydney area and lists community services
- [My Community Directory](#) – directory of health and community services in NSW and other states.

- [Infoxchange](#) – national database of community support services.
- [MHCC Mental Health Rights Manual](#) – this is a guide is for people with mental ill-health conditions navigating the system in NSW and has information about relevant support services.

Action learning activities

- Reflect on the points raised in the [Understanding Our Clients video](#) and consider if there are aspects you could improve on in the way you work with clients who have mental ill-health. Take action to make changes where appropriate.
- Think about how you might develop a rapport with your client and put this into action when you meet. Consider what worked well and what you would do differently next time.
- Discuss support services for non-legal issues with your client and help your client access these services if required.
- Complete the relevant [Lawyer Education Series modules](#) and webinar and reflect on your learnings.
- Review one or more of the resources below and consider how you can apply any insights to your practice.

Useful resources

- **The Legal Aid NSW** Lawyer Education Series training module [Mental Health Matters](#).
- **The Legal Aid NSW** Lawyer Education Series training module [Guardianship Toolkit](#).
- [Decision Making Support for People with a Cognitive Disability](#) contains information and tips for working with people with cognitive impairment.
- [Recovery-Oriented Language Guide](#) – a practical guide for using recovery-oriented language developed by the Mental Health Coordinating Council, the peak body for community mental health organisations in NSW.
- [Communicating Effectively – Practical Strategies and Tips for Effective Support](#) – this NSW Health page has tip sheets organised according to different types of mental health conditions.
- [Having Conversations About Trauma](#) – this Blue Knot Foundation Guide provides information about the nature of trauma, its impacts and responding to clients.

- [SANE Factsheets and Guides](#) provide information about a range of complex mental health issues, developed by people with lived experience of mental ill-health.
- [Legal Aid NSW Quality Standards Manual](#) – this document outlines the practice standards, client service standards, panel requirements and law practice requirements that apply to your role.