

A Lawyer's Guide to Helping Clients with Mental Health Concerns

This practical guide assists Singapore legal practitioners in managing clients with mental health concerns



LEGAL AID BUREAU

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Introduction

Mental health challenges are increasingly common in Singapore. The proportion of Singapore residents aged 18 to 74 years experiencing poor mental health increased from 12.5% in 2017 to 15.4% in 2024, with the greatest increase among young adults (National Population Health Survey 2024, Ministry of Health Singapore). Clients facing litigation may be particularly vulnerable due to the stressful nature of court proceedings.

This Guide provides practical help for lawyers who encounter clients showing signs of significant stress or mental health concerns. It aims to help lawyers:

- Recognise when clients may need professional help for mental health concerns
- Speak to clients about seeking such professional help
- Make appropriate referrals to therapeutic professionals
- Work constructively with the therapeutic professionals who are seeing or will be seeing their clients

The scenarios and sample scripts provided throughout this Guide are designed to illustrate the practical applications of these principles. They demonstrate how lawyers can facilitate productive relationships between their clients and therapeutic professionals whilst maintaining appropriate boundaries and protecting their clients' interests.

Some perspectives and ideas presented in this document were drawn from insights shared during the Legal Aid Bureau's lawyer-social worker networking event in August 2025. We further acknowledge family law practitioner Ms Amalina Kamal, the Strengthening Families Programme (Montfort Care), and Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) for their invaluable input in the preparation of this Guide.

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Important Disclaimer

The guidance, scenarios, and scripts contained in this document are broad guidelines and illustrative examples only. Every legal case is unique and must be considered on its own specific facts and circumstances. Lawyers should conduct appropriate legal research and analysis for each matter, taking into account the particular needs of the client, the applicable law, relevant court procedures, and the specific services and protocols of the professionals involved. Lawyers should always verify current procedures and requirements with the relevant professionals and institutions before providing advice to clients.

This document does not constitute legal advice and should not be relied upon as a substitute for proper case-specific legal analysis and professional judgement.

Referring Clients with Mental Health Concerns to Therapeutic Professionals

Recognising When the Client Needs Therapeutic Professional Support

Signs and Indicators of Mental Health Concerns

This checklist helps lawyers recognise observable signs of distress or potential mental health concerns in a client, and assess when they may benefit from professional help. It is not a diagnostic tool for mental health issues – only a tool to help lawyers work out whether this is a situation where they should ask their clients whether they wish to consider seeking help from therapeutic professionals.

Sign	Indicator
Communication and Cognition	
Difficulty with Focus	The client appears easily distracted, loses his/her train of thought frequently, or has trouble following complex questions.
Confusing or Disorganised Narrative	The client's account of events is illogical, jumps between topics, or includes highly improbable details.
Repetitive/Looping Conversation	The client repeatedly circles back to the same grievances, facts, or points, seemingly unable to move forward in the discussion or accept your legal advice.
Poor Memory/Recall	The client struggles to recall key facts, dates, or names relevant to their case, beyond normal nervousness.
Extreme Slowness/Racing Speech	Speech is unusually slow, labored, or delayed (poverty of speech), or conversely, very rapid, pressured, and difficult to interrupt (flight of ideas).

Emotional and Behavioural Presentation

Emotional Paralysis/ Indecision	The client is unable to make decisions or give clear instructions because they are extremely emotional, distressed, or overwhelmed by the situation.
Intense Focus on Opposing Party	The client exhibits intense feelings (e.g. anger, fear, trauma) towards the other party, such that they cannot discuss the person or the facts without becoming highly emotional and completely unable to be objective, or to see the other party's point of view.
Intense or Inappropriate Affect	The client's emotional expression (affect) seems disproportionate to the situation (e.g. crying frequently, sudden bursts of anger, or laughing inappropriately).
High Levels of Anxiety/ Distress	The client shows visible signs of acute anxiety: excessive fidgeting, trembling, sweating, difficulty sitting still, or panic attacks.
Language of Hopelessness	The client uses fatalistic or pervasive negative language, e.g., "Nothing will ever change," "I cannot take it any more," or expressing complete helplessness/worthlessness. This may also include indications of self-harm or suicide.

Case Management and Reliability

Repeated No-Shows or Delays	The client consistently misses appointments, is late without reasonable explanation, or fails to return essential documents.
Excessive Contact/ Demands	The client makes an unusually high volume of calls or emails, seeking constant reassurance or making unrealistic demands.
Unrealistic Beliefs	The client holds irrational beliefs about the legal process or outcome (e.g., believing a conspiracy is driving the case or that the judge will arbitrarily rule in their favour or against them, for non-legal reasons).

These signs and indicators are broadly derived from the following sites:

1. Health Hub: <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/https://www.healthhub.sg/programmes/mindsg/caring-for-ourselves/understanding-depression-adults#depression-signs-and-symptoms>
2. Allkin Singapore: <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/https://www.allkin.org.sg/be-inspired/recognising-subtle-signs-of-mental-health-struggles-early>
3. Phoenix Medical: <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/https://phoenixmedical.sg/mental-health-singapore/>
4. St Luke's Hospital: <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/https://www.slh.org.sg/its-okay-to-not-be-okay/>
5. Promises Healthcare: <https://safe.menlosecurity.com/https://promises.com.sg/blog/7-signs-you-need-to-see-a-psychiatrist-in-singapore/>

Escalating from Observation to Referral

In certain areas, such as family practice, it is common that clients present with some of the indicators identified above. Clients may experience an initial period of grief or dysregulation when proceedings commence, but gradually regain stability as they adapt to the process. It is thus important to distinguish between acute, situational distress and more entrenched mental health concerns.

Lawyers should use their observation and judgment to assess whether the client simply requires time to adapt, rather than assistance from a therapeutic professional. Examples include clients experiencing initial grief that stabilises over time, clients with existing support systems, and clients who are coping adequately and simply need legal clarity and assurance. In such scenarios, referrals may not be necessary.

However, if the client exhibits a significant number of these indicators to the extent that it interferes with your ability to take proper instructions or obtain considered decisions from them, consider the following approach:

- Make detailed, objective notes about the observed behaviours and their impact on your ability to represent the client. This may be useful if you need to communicate with the client's therapeutic professional subsequently.
- To enable your client to better understand what you are saying, break down the legal advice into smaller, simpler steps. Use clear, non-technical language and follow up verbal advice with written summaries.
- Gently suggest that seeing a therapeutic professional could help them manage the stress of the legal process and improve their clarity for decision-making.

Handling Crisis Situations

When clients exhibit immediate safety concerns such as suicidal ideation, threats of violence, severe psychotic symptoms, or complete emotional breakdown, lawyers must prioritise safety over legal matters. Stay calm, do not leave the client alone, ask direct questions about self-harm or violence plans, and take immediate action if necessary.

For immediate danger, call Police (999) for violence threats or SCDF Ambulance (995) for medical/psychiatric emergencies. For crisis support, lawyers may contact Samaritans of Singapore (1767, 24/7) or Institute of Mental Health Emergency (6389 2222).

Encouraging the Client to Seek Professional Support

General Pointers

When encouraging clients to seek professional support, lawyers should adopt the following approach:

- Maintain eye contact and use a warm tone: Show genuine concern.
- Use soft but firm language: "I suggest" or "I recommend"; avoid "You need" or "You must".
- Offer resources: Provide referrals or offer to do a referral for the client.
- Stress confidentiality: Remind the client that therapy is confidential and not shared with you or the court (unless specific exceptions apply).

Framing Therapeutic Intervention Positively

The following suggested scripts assist lawyers to frame therapeutic intervention positively to clients when encouraging them to seek professional support.

Focus on Stress and Case Management

"The legal process can be very stressful, and the details of this case can be very personal and painful for you to discuss. Having someone to talk to about what you're going through can give you a safe space to process those feelings and make the case feel less overwhelming."

"If you have a counsellor or therapist, they can help you find ways to stay focused on what you need to do, and how to manage your feelings. This will be really helpful when we need to make important decisions quickly and ensure you are also comfortable with making those decisions."

"I want to make sure I am getting the best, clearest instructions from you. I've found clients who have some sort of support from a professional like a counsellor are calmer and better able to deal with all the challenges of having a legal case – being able to put your emotions to one side when you have to read what the other side says and think of a response, or consider the offers they make when negotiating."

"I know you're going through a hard time. Fighting a legal case is very tough. I will do my best for you for your legal case – but you also need to take care of yourself. Maybe think about seeing a counsellor? They can talk to you about how to take better care of yourself, so you're not so sad and angry all the time. I can understand why you're so sad and angry – but if you want a good result for your case, we will need to do a lot of work, and you can't do this work if you're so upset all the time."

Use Collaborative and Empowering Language

"As your lawyer, my job is to handle the legal details. As a person, your job is to take care of yourself. I strongly suggest you find a therapist to help with self-care so you can be at your best for this process."

"This isn't about anything being 'wrong.' It's about recognising that you're facing one of the most challenging periods of your life. Getting a professional in your corner to support your mental well-being is a sign of strength and smart preparation."

"I recommend adding a therapist to your 'support team.' Think of them as a dedicated resource for your emotional needs, just like I am your resource for legal needs."

Considerations in Family Cases Involving Children

In family cases involving children, lawyers should:

- Proactively check with clients on how the children are coping during the proceedings.
- Raise awareness with parents that children are inevitably affected by family disputes – even if they appear unaffected.
- Recognise warning signs from parents' accounts or descriptions of their children (e.g. loss of appetite, sleep difficulties, behavioural changes) and help parents to recognise such warning signs.

Where there are potential concerns about the children from the client's sharing, lawyers can guide the client towards appropriate therapeutic support for the children:

- Explain that seeking support demonstrates commitment to the child's wellbeing during divorce proceedings.
- Emphasise that counsellors are neutral parties who prioritise the child's best interests, they are not there to decide who is right or wrong.
- Remind parents that children often blame themselves for parental conflict, and counselling helps them realise they are not alone.

Examples of useful lines:

"Children may believe that they are responsible for conflicts between their parents. Counselling may help them understand that difficulties in adult relationships are not their fault and provide a safe space for them to process their feelings without blame."

“Your child's reluctance to see the other parent might be because they feel caught in the middle of your conflict. A counsellor can help both of you understand what your child is really experiencing and find ways to make the situation less stressful for them.”

“Seeking counselling doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you or your child - it shows you recognise your child is struggling and you're willing to get help. You going for counselling also shows that you recognise that you're in a challenging situation, and are willing to do something about it. These are exactly what a responsible parent does during a crisis.”

“Your child is showing clear signs of distress – [for example] bedwetting, school refusal, and anxiety. He needs help before difficulties get worse. Meeting with a counsellor will give him a safe space to talk about how he feels and process what is happening. The counsellor can also help support you through this process – you deserve to have a safe space too, to talk about what you're going through. You can also learn how to support your child, so that he gets better.”

For family cases, therapeutic support is already available for both parents and children through the existing support structures provided by the Family Justice Courts, such as Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS). Through these services, clients may continue to receive counselling even after proceedings conclude, and high-conflict families may be referred to the Strengthening Families Programme centres (FAM) for longer-term intervention. In such cases, lawyers should consider whether the court-linked ecosystem provides sufficient support or whether additional assistance from external professionals is necessary.

Obtaining Client Consent for Information-Sharing

As far as possible, encourage the client to directly seek help from a therapeutic professional.

However, if the client requires your assistance to refer them to a therapeutic professional:

- Ask the client specifically whether they agree to you sharing information with the therapeutic professional, for the purpose of assisting with their mental health challenges and concerns.
- Clarify the scope of information the client consents to share with the therapeutic professional. For example, the history of the client's marriage and breakdown, the status of the legal proceedings, and your personal observations of the client's mood and frame of mind, based on your interactions with the client.
- Keep an attendance note of this conversation.

Maintaining Professional Boundaries

While lawyers play an important role in supporting clients through stressful legal processes, it is essential to maintain clear professional boundaries when dealing with clients who have mental health concerns.

In particular, lawyers should:

- **Respect the client's autonomy in decision-making** — Clients retain the right to make their own decisions about their legal case and whether to seek therapeutic support. Lawyers may strongly encourage or recommend professional help, but should not pressure or coerce clients into doing so.
- **Avoid attempting to diagnose mental health conditions** — Lawyers are not trained mental health professionals. Observations about a client's behaviour should remain descriptive and functional (e.g. how it affects instructions), rather than diagnostic.
- **Avoid assuming the role of a therapist** — While it is appropriate to show empathy and provide reassurance, lawyers should not engage in therapeutic counselling beyond what is necessary for the legal matter.
- **Avoid communicating with therapeutic professionals without clear client consent** — Any communication with a therapeutic professional should be done only with the client's informed consent, and within the agreed scope of information-sharing.

Working with Therapeutic Professionals

Types of Therapeutic Professionals

There are various types of therapeutic professionals, for example counsellors, psychologists or psychiatrists:

Type	Qualifications	How they can help	When to refer
Counsellors	Qualified in counselling – i.e. has an undergraduate or postgraduate degree or diploma in counselling	Practical guidance, conflict resolution, emotional support. Counsellors often have psychotherapist training, and therefore can employ one of a few therapeutic modalities, depending on the needs of the client. Some common examples include Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).	When parties require help to work through relationship conflict, parenting challenges or emotional distress, etc. Counsellors will assess the situation and recommend appropriate modes of counselling.
Psychologists	Qualified in psychology – i.e. has a master's or doctoral degree in applied psychology	Assessment, therapy and structured interventions. Address underlying issues like trauma, depression or anxiety.	When there are complex psychological issues requiring formal assessment or specialised therapeutic interventions.
Psychiatrists	Medical doctors specialising in mental health issues and conditions	Diagnosing psychiatric disorders and prescribing medication, though they can also provide psychotherapy.	When a person suspected of having or diagnosed with a mental health condition (e.g. bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, severe depression, suicide risk) that is fuelling conflict, and medication may be needed along with therapy.

Where clients present with a mental health challenge or concern, lawyers can refer them to a counsellor as a first step. If the counsellor is of the view that the client would benefit from the help of a psychologist or psychiatrist, the counsellor can make the necessary referral.

Contacting the Therapeutic Professional

When making the referral (with the client's consent):

- Clarify whether the professional's role is supposed to be therapeutic (helping manage mental health challenges) or forensic (custody evaluation). For the former, explain that you're seeking support to help the client.
- Share relevant information (with your client's consent) about the client.
- Ask questions about how the professional can work with the client, what you can tell the client about the professional which would be helpful, and how the professional envisions working together with you to support the client.

Example scenario: A 10-year-old has been showing symptoms of anxiety, bedwetting and school refusal after witnessing numerous parental arguments. The parents separated 3 months ago following physical and verbal abuse allegations. Each parent blames the other for the child's distress - the mother says the father is too strict, whilst the father says the mother nags but is also too permissive.

Example script (lawyer to therapeutic professional):

Hello, I'm representing one of the parents in this family where the parents are on bad terms and my client, the mother, is thinking of getting a divorce. They have a 10-year-old who is having anxiety, bedwetting and refusing to go to school. The parents have very different views on what's causing the child's behaviour. The mother has agreed for the child to go for counselling, to help the child. So I am contacting you to see if you can counsel the child and the mother. The mother has consented to me sharing information with you about the case. Maybe you can share what my client and the child can expect when you work with them, so I can let my client know? Anything that you would like to ask me about the case that you would find helpful?

Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries

After making a referral:

- Limit communication to administrative matters such as scheduling or confirming attendance of the client. Communication on other substantive matters relating to the client or the case should be minimised and shared only with the client's express agreement.
- Generally, there is no need to send the therapeutic professional court documents. It would be best to let the therapeutic professional focus on what the client has to say, without having to deal with the "noise" of all the court documents.

Supporting the Therapeutic Process

You can support the professional's work by educating your client regarding their role and how your client can work with them –

Explain the Professional's Role

Clarify that the professional is there to provide a client-centered perspective, focused entirely on the client's mental well-being and emotional regulation, not on building a legal case or "fixing" the opponent. The client should trust the process as a tool for personal clarity.

Example: "The therapist isn't here to decide if you're right or wrong in the legal dispute. They are there to help you manage the anxiety and stress so you can be mentally clear and present for the decisions we need to make together."

Encourage Cooperation and Compliance

Encourage the client to commit fully to the process: attend sessions punctually, be open and honest, and follow any advice on stress management or emotional regulation. Caution the client that lack of cooperation or consistency will delay their own recovery and, consequently, their ability to focus on the case.

Example: "I know that you're a very busy person, and it can be hard for you to attend these counselling sessions. But I encourage you to give it a try – try at least 2-3 sessions and see how it goes. I don't think you can expect that everything will be cured in just a few sessions, but if you are patient and just stick with going to more sessions, I think things will get better in time. But you need to be very open and honest with the counsellor – just say whatever is on your mind, it's ok, the counsellor is there to listen and to help. The counsellor is not going to tell you what to do – but after talking with them, you should hopefully feel better, and be able to think more clearly what is best for you and the children."

Emphasising Confidentiality and Safety of Therapy

Advise the client that therapy is a safe, confidential space for them to be honest. Warn against viewing the therapist as a strategic tool for the lawsuit.

Example: "Your time with the therapist is supposed to be a safe, honest space for you to say what's on your mind and in your heart. Whatever is making you sad or angry or upset – just say it out. Don't try to use the therapist to prepare for court or discuss your spouse's flaws – just focus on yourself and what you really want and why – just use the time to think about you and how you can get to a better place, no matter what your spouse does or how this court case goes."

Resources for Referrals to Therapeutic Professionals

Primary Services

Service	Services Provided	Contact
Family Service Centres (FSCs)	There are 49 FSCs (as of Aug 2025) across Singapore which provide support (including casework and groupwork) for vulnerable individuals and families with social and emotional issues.	Website: https://www.msf.gov.sg/our-services/directories Access this link to view all the FSCs and their contact details.
Strengthening Families Programme Centres (FAM)	There are 11 FAM centres which provide the following services: • Family counselling for individuals, couples and families experiencing conflict and stress in family relationships • Divorce support programmes for divorcing or divorced couples, as well as support programmes for the children to cope with the divorce. • Early-risk marriage support for minor marriages, young couples, transnational marriages, and remarriages.	Website: https://www.msf.gov.sg/what-we-do/fam/home Access this link to view all the FAM centres and their contact details. Lawyers who wish to refer cases to FAM centres may complete the referral form here: link .

National Council of Social Service (NCSS) Supported Counselling Service	This initiative provides accessible and affordable counselling support to those in need through a network of counselling service providers across Singapore. The services are offered both in-person and online. Subsidised rates are available for specific groups, such as Pioneer or Merdeka Generation cardholders, Blue or Orange Community Health Assist Scheme (CHAS) cardholders, full-time students from Ministry of Education schools (primary to tertiary level), and those receiving financial assistance from Social Service Offices or Restructured Hospitals.	Website: https://www.ncss.gov.sg/research-and-insights/community-resources/ncss-supported-counselling-services/ Access this link to view the counselling centres and their contact details.
Online Counselling on Family Assist (OCFA)	OCFA is an anonymous platform providing online counselling for individuals experiencing pre-marital, marital, parenting, divorce, and family-related issues. It is run by a team of qualified counsellors from the FAM centres. OCFA is: • Available to Singapore citizens, permanent residents and non-residents of Singapore with a Singapore nexus, aged 18 and above. • Conducted over live chat, audio call, and email. • Available from Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm (excluding public holidays) and on the eve of New Year, Chinese New Year and Christmas, 9am to 1pm. • Anonymous (you are not required to reveal any personal details such as your name or NRIC). • Free-of-charge.	Website: https://familyassist.msf.gov.sg/content/resources/counselling/ways-to-seek-counselling/online-counselling/ Login/register for online counselling at this link.

National Anti-Violence and Sexual Harassment Helpline (NAVH)	NAVH provides support for individuals experiencing: • Family violence • Child abuse concerns • Sexual harassment • Other forms of violence or abuse When to Contact NAVH: • If you or someone you know is experiencing abuse or violence • To report suspected child abuse or neglect • For guidance on safety planning • To access support services and resources	Hotline: 1800-777-0000 (24/7) Online Reporting: Available through the NAVH Reporting Form https://go.gov.sg/navh
PAVE Integrated Services Ltd	Casework/ counselling is provided by professionally trained social workers who specialise in family violence. The services are open to persons who abuse, survivors and child witnesses of abuse.	Website: https://pave.org.sg/our-services/ Address: Ang Mo Kio Office- Blk 211 Ang Mo Kio Ave 3 #01-1446 Singapore 560211 Yishun Office (Closed on Fridays)- Blk 305 Yishun Central #01-175 Singapore 760305 Tel: 6555 0390 Email: intake@pave.org.sg

Other Services

Service	Services Provided	Contact
James Cook University Singapore (JCUS) Psychology Clinic	JCUS Psychology Clinic offers confidential clinical psychology services to JCUS students, as well as the public. Services are offered to both children (ages 0 to 17) and adults (18 years old and above).	Website: https://www.jcu.edu.sg/current-students/student-support-services/psychology-clinic
NUS Clinical and Health Psychology Centre (CHPC)	NUS CHPC provides an array of specialised psychology services to the public.	Website: https://fass.nus.edu.sg/psy/clinical-and-health-psychology-centre/
NIE Wellness Centre	NIE Wellness Centre provides high-quality, affordable psychological assessments and counselling services to NTU/ NIE staff, students, and the public.	Website: https://www.ntu.edu.sg/nie/about-us/campus-facilities/nie-wellness-centre