

Using the Six Levels of Validation to Improve Client Conversations

by Sam Allison-Natale and Erin Nisly

My partner used to tell me I was negative. Shooting down bad ideas, waking people up to uncomfortable truths, arguing about the details – these are habits that people tend to associate with lawyers (and not always favorably). In some ways, it's a necessary function of our role as counselors for our clients, but it doesn't make us much fun at parties, nor does it always create healthy relationships with clients.

This is especially true for our clients who may have mental health crises or parts of their personal history, such as Borderline Personality Disorder, that make invalidation especially triggering, stressful, and difficult. Telling an escalated person to calm down has never calmed anyone down, and telling a person experiencing a delusion that they're deluded is a recipe for your client pulling away.

Thankfully, there's a better way. These challenging moments are a chance for you to build trust, foster understanding, help with emotional regulation, and validate your client's feelings and experiences. The way to do this is implementing the Six Steps of Validation - a technique developed by social workers and psychologists in the context of therapy for Borderline Personality Disorder, but which can be useful for connecting with many clients in stressful situations.

There are six "levels," each one building on the one before. We want to encourage attorneys and advocates to learn more about these steps as a practice to incorporate with clients.

Level 1. Be Present with Your Client and Use Active Listening

The first step is showing the client that you are actively listening to them. It can be hard to be fully present, to not let your mind wander, not multi-task or give in to distraction. Level one is to give your client full-attention. Put your phone down, make eye-contact, and pay attention to what they are saying. You should use your body language to validate that you fully hear what your client is saying.

This could include:

- Nodding your head
- Saying "yes" or "I get that."

Level 2. Accurately Reflect What Your Client Told You

Level two is about showing your clients that you heard them accurately. Once your client has told you something, summarize what you heard and check for accuracy. The most effective way

to do this is paraphrasing and repeating back your client's feelings. E.g. "It sounds like you're really worried that the trial is going to be delayed again." This step helps your client feel heard and demonstrates that you understand how they are feeling. It also gives your client an opportunity to correct you if you didn't hear them accurately. This step can also help a client sort through their own thoughts and separate those thoughts from their emotions.

You can use phrases like:

- "You seem to be feeling..."
- "It sounds like you're saying X"

Level 3. Articulate Your Client's Non-Verbal Communication

Reading a client's behavior and emotional state and guessing what they might be thinking or feeling is an important key to validation. It is important to address statements like, "I'm fine" or "it's not a big deal" when your client's body language does not match their statements. You can help a client identify their feelings by addressing their body language and the possible thoughts behind their words and actions. "If I were in your position, I would be feeling pretty frustrated. Is that how you're feeling?" When you articulate a client's thoughts and emotions from their body language, you might guess wrong and they might correct you. That's okay. The big thing is to put yourself in their position, and show them you understand their true feelings.

You can use phrases like:

- "I know you said this isn't a big deal, but it seems like you are really frustrated"
- "This seems like it is weighing you down. Are you sure you are okay?"

Level 4. Validate Your Client's Behavior in Terms of Their History

Level four involves incorporating the previous levels and putting those into the lens of your client's past. You want to emphasize that what they are thinking or feeling makes sense given their experiences. **You can validate that it makes sense that someone is feeling a certain way, even if you disagree with that thought or emotion.** The important thing is emphasizing that *how they got here makes sense*. Crucially, this is distinct from saying that the thing they're thinking *is true*, which can be dangerous if they're really delusional. But they can be wrong, and it can still make sense how they got that answer. Asking yourself how your client's history informs their current situation, and how their past helps them make sense of what they are experiencing today, can help you empathize with your client instead of dismissing their feelings, thoughts, and actions.

You can use the phrase:

- "Given what you've been through, it's completely understandable why you feel like that."

- “I think a lot of people who went through what you went through would feel the way that you do.

Level 5. Validate their feelings in relationship to the circumstances

It is important to acknowledge that your client’s emotional reaction is one that others in their position could have. **Feelings are facts - it is a fact that this person is feeling something, and that their circumstances are the reason why.** Observe your client’s feelings and connect those to a larger human experience. This can help alleviate your client’s feelings of isolation and overwhelmed-ness. Additionally, it gives your client a sense that their emotions are not strange or inappropriate, but normal.

You can do this by telling your client:

- “I think anyone in your circumstances would feel that way.”
- “I get why you feel isolated. I bet a lot of people are struggling with the same things.”

Level 6. Be Radically Genuine

The last level of validation happens when you respond in the moment to your client’s emotions and experience, human to human. You can bring in your experiences, your flaws, and your humanity to show your client that you’re a person too. This shows that you truly care and genuinely want to support your client. Radical genuineness may come in the form of laughing or crying with your client or giving a hug. It is that moment of true, human to human response that shows that you really are *for* your client.

These levels of validation are a way of being intentional about, and consistently applying, basic techniques of connection that we already do to some extent in many other parts of our lives. These same techniques can also be used to de-escalate and connect emotionally with other people in the legal system who might also not always be rational (like judges or prosecutors). Starting with this framework can help attorneys reduce judgment, and form a basis for a relationship of real teamwork with clients. Give it a try.

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