

How to support numeracy difficulties



Time and number concepts often become important in legal proceedings.

A defendant, respondent or other court user might be asked how often 'X' happened, how many times they met 'Y', how far away they were from 'Z'. They might also be asked for the date or time an event took place, or to state the length of time something took.

Difficulties with time and number are distinct from memory difficulties, although these areas of difficulty can be interrelated. An individual who has difficulty with time and number concepts may clearly remember an event taking place but may not be able to state exactly when it occurred.

There are many different reasons why your client may have difficulty in this area:

- **Dyscalculia:** The British Dyslexia Association states that around 6% of people have dyscalculia, a specific learning difficulty, which impacts an individual's 'number sense'. They may struggle to remember numbers, mix numbers up, have weak mathematic skills (e.g., in simple addition or subtraction), struggle with sequencing or have difficulty understanding graphs or charts.
- **Access to education:** Clients who were not able to attend school regularly or who had difficulty remaining in lessons may not have learned key numeracy skills or time concepts (like telling the time or the order of the months). This can affect their ability to discuss times and dates with clarity or precision.

- **Learning disability:** A client with a learning disability may also have difficulty understanding times, dates and numbers.
- **Cultural differences:** Some clients from different cultural backgrounds may not be as familiar with the Gregorian calendar and may have different significant 'marker events' in their culture's calendar (e.g., 'before Christmas' may not be a helpful marker event).

How to help

The strategies required to support an individual who has numeracy difficulties will vary from person to person. An [intermediary assessment](#) will provide insight into your client's ability to understand and use time and number information (alongside other areas of their communication profile).

The following general tips may be of assistance:

- **Ask your client about their number skills** and whether they have any difficulties with times and dates. They may have insight into their difficulties and strategies which assist. Be aware that it can be difficult for some people to disclose their difficulties.
- **Refer to events by name, not date.** For example, instead of asking about the "16th December 2022", ask about "the night you met Carl".
- **Use 'marker' events**, if a date took place close to a significant event, e.g., "The day before Christmas", "Around Kai's birthday".

- **Use visual timelines or calendars.** Be aware that some clients may struggle to interpret traditional calendar layouts and a simple linear timeline may be more helpful. Learn more about [visual aids here](#).
- **Encourage use of gesture** when discussing size or distance. For example, ask them to show you how tall a person was, or how far away they were standing. Use props like the witness box and the dock to support description of longer distances.
- **Use comparisons** to discuss lengths of time. For example, you could ask if an event lasted longer than an episode of your client's favourite soap, or less than the time it takes to boil a kettle.

During your client's evidence

Difficulties with times, dates and numbers can make it especially challenging for an individual to give clear evidence. Lack of clarity and precision can result in responses which may be inaccurate or may be mispercieved as evasive, unreliable or untruthful.

Raising these difficulties with the court, for example during a Ground Rules Hearing, will help ensure everyone is aware of possible difficulties which may arise.

It may also assist to ask that questions containing numbers, times and dates are put to them with care or avoided altogether. Keep in mind:

- Clients who have difficulties in this area may be more likely to agree in error with assertions containing numerical information. Lack of confidence in this area may also be mispercieved as evasiveness.
- This may pose a particular challenge if questions containing time or number information are repeated, as your client may become confused, doubt themselves, change their answer or defer to the questioner.

- They may benefit from access to a timeline agreed by all parties and the judge in the case.
- Encouraging your client to indicate when they do not know an answer and reminding them not to guess (and ensuring they feel comfortable doing so) can help prevent miscommunication and result in clearer evidence.

Intermediary services

If you are concerned about your client's ability to communicate effectively and participate in legal proceedings, an intermediary assessment and report will explore their communication profile and make bespoke recommendations (if required) to support their participation. If intermediary assistance is recommended and approved by the court, an intermediary can be allocated to assist in hearings and conferences.

How to book an intermediary

- 1 Refer online.** Refer your client for an assessment through [our online portal](#) (5 minutes).
- 2 Funding.** We send a quote for you to send to Legal Aid / HMCTS to approve (24 hours).
- 3 Book assessment.** Once funding is approved, please let us know. We will schedule an assessment (2-6 weeks).
- 4 Assessment will** take up to 3 hours and can be conducted in person or remotely. You will then recieve a report (7 days).
- 5 Book dates** for hearings or conferences. We will send you booking forms to be signed by the court. Once signed, we will book the intermediary.