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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING

**ALLOW
SURVIVORS TO
SPEAK IN THEIR
OWN WAY AND IN
THEIR OWN TIME**

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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING**ALLOW SURVIVORS
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During sexual violence, people are treated by perpetrators as objects – not as individuals who have any control over what happens to them. Can you reverse that dynamic and give interviewees a say in how they will tell their story?

The need to treat vulnerable people with consideration, respect and dignity should be obvious. But what does that involve in practical terms?

As a journalist interviewing a survivor, you are in a power position – even if it may not feel like it. Trust and emotional safety are going to be issues. It is important, then, that you don't do anything that might echo the original abuse, even in a small way, such as rushing them or pushing for a response. This can be easy to lose sight of when you're on a deadline in a hazardous location.

Prioritise planning enough time for the conversation and make sure that your interviewee knows that:

- **There is no need to answer any questions that feel uncomfortable.**
- **It is OK to stop at any time.**
- **You won't publish any details that they ask you not to.**

See your interviewee as a person first – and only secondly as a source of material for a story.

Media interviews can cause harm to survivors if they are exploitative or carried out unsafely. This section discusses the basics of trauma-appropriate interviewing; the next [[#5](#)] looks in more detail at specific trauma reactions and the challenges they can pose when working with survivors.

Journalists often understandably worry that just talking about harrowing, painful experiences such as sexual violence or torture may inevitably harm an interviewee. They may fear that they are bringing up things again that best remain unsaid. Or they may equate the distress that someone experiences in telling their story with causing fresh harm.

Most trauma experts who work with sexual abuse survivors don't think that the talking itself is really where the significant dangers lie. It is more to do with how safe the interviewee feels during the conversation, how much control they have over what is talked about, and also how their story is published afterward [see [#7](#) and [#8](#)]. Harm is likely to arise when people feel judged or not listened to, or feel they are being used for an ulterior purpose, such as being mined for a quick sound bite. In trauma interviews, trust is a delicate, easily damaged thing.

There are exceptions to the idea that talking itself is consequence free. For example, if somebody has experienced something intensely traumatic in the past that they have sealed off and not examined before, such as child sexual abuse, then *talking itself* can be destabilising and can carry different risks. In general, be careful about surprising people with unexpected information.

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How to make the process more collaborative, less extractive

People experience sexual trauma as a fundamental loss of control – something which happened to them that they were powerless to prevent. One way to counter this is to give away some of the control you might normally exercise as a journalist and to involve your interviewee in decisions about the process. Even small choices can make a big difference.

Before getting into any detail in a conversation, you should:

- Acknowledge that speaking is likely to be difficult.
- Involve them fully in the decision of where they would like to be interviewed.
- Ask what time of day would suit them best – when they would be likely to have the most energy for the conversation and for how long they would like to talk for?
- Ask if there is anybody that they would like to be with them in the room, such as a friend or relative.
- Ask them if there is anything that they would rather not speak about.
- Reassure them that they don't have to answer anything that makes them uncomfortable.

It is good practice to ask people before you get into the conversation how you as the interviewer will recognise when they might have had enough of talking and need a break. People may get lost in the thickets of telling their story. And besides, most of us experience a strong subconscious desire to carry on to please someone who is asking questions. They may not be very good at signalling when they are tired or when the conversation has entered territory that feels uncomfortable and is getting to be too much. Raising this before the interview gets going – and perhaps agreeing on a specific signal – makes suggesting breaks or changing tracks to a safer topic more natural and less disruptive.

Agreeing on the words to use

Section **#7** talks more about language choices at publication. During the interview itself, make sure that you are using words your interviewee is comfortable with. Local idioms may or may not be helpful here. There are some clear rules. For example, it is never appropriate to describe a perpetrator as someone's lover.

Most people who have suffered sexual violence describe themselves as 'survivors'; but some might feel that 'victim' is a more accurate word and others might want to avoid both. If you have any doubts about what words to use, check with your interviewee and ask what they would prefer. In general, it is always important to respect how people self-identify.

The power of listening

When people believe they are being heard, they feel more secure and are then able to gather their thoughts more effectively. Knowing how to listen well is probably the single most important skill that a journalist needs to bring to a conversation with a trauma survivor. It involves giving space to one's subject and asking simple, relatively open questions, which give people some choice about how they want to reply but not so much choice that the choices become overwhelming.

Remember that, as discussed in section **#2**, checking consent is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. You might want to preface the question with a quick, "Is it OK to ask about ... (a specific topic or event)?" Then allow people to respond freely.

Katy Robjant, who works with CRSV survivors in the DRC and other places, has this specific advice for journalists:

Rather than asking open-ended questions about general events, establish with your interviewee that there is something specific you hope to speak about. Then ask them to tell you as much as they can about that

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event or topic. After they've given you all the information they feel comfortable sharing, it becomes your job to extract the salient parts. This is one way to avoid forcing your interviewee to talk about details they don't want to share or think about.^[a]

Pointers for effective listening include:

- Allowing for silences and giving people space to collect their thoughts.
- Using verbal or, if you're recording, nonverbal markers to show that you are still with them.
- Checking back to make sure you have understood key points.
- Knowing how to sit with your own discomfort and not allowing it to take the focus away from your interviewee.

Try to avoid:

- Finishing people's sentences for them or cutting across their chain of thought abruptly (unless they get lost in a memory – see section **#5**).
- Giving any impression of judgement – for example, pulling a horrified face when somebody relates something that may well be horrifying (expressing concern or how sorry you are is fine.)
- Any probing of graphic or physical details.
- Telling people that you know how they feel (people are unlikely to believe you do).

You should also be cautious about telling people that you have had similar experiences or going into autobiographical detail. In some situations, this can build trust and develop the conversation; in others, it can take the focus away from the interviewee and leave them feeling that you're minimising or sidelining their experience. (The need to maintain healthy boundaries is discussed more in section **#6**.)

Managing the time and ending well

The title of this section, *Allowing Survivors the space to Speak in their own Way and in their own Time* does not mean, however, that you should be entirely passive in shaping the time. When people are vulnerable, they benefit from the conversation having some guiderails. And as mentioned above, you need to be watching their energy levels. (If you are in the area for a time you can always offer to come back and pick up on the conversation later.)

Some clinicians talk about the *rule of three thirds*. Ideally the first third of the conversation should focus on a time and experiences in which the interviewee felt relatively safe; the middle section, on the most difficult material, for example the traumatic events themselves; and the last section, on the present and the future – anything which helps the survivor bridge back into the here and now. You don't want to be leaving someone at the end of an interview still fully immersed in the worst of what happened to them.

Try to end on a positive note, but don't force it and pretend things are better than they are. You can ask people what they have found helpful in dealing with this and what they would recommend to others. It is not always easy to find a solid endpoint. At the very least, you can always ask people what they will be doing for the rest of the day. Remember, of course, to thank people, and keep any promises you make in terms of future contact, sending information about the piece, and so forth.

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[a] See <https://dartcentre.org/resources/reporting-refugees-tips-covering-crisis>