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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING

**UNDERSTAND
TRAUMA'S
CONTINUING
IMPACT ON
MEMORY AND
FEELINGS OF
SAFETY**



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THREE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES
FOR SAFER INTERVIEWING

UNDERSTAND TRAUMA'S CONTINUING IMPACT ON MEMORY AND FEELINGS OF SAFETY

Some basic knowledge about trauma responses can help you navigate challenging interview situations and avoid consequential reporting errors.

People are likely to become upset when revisiting harrowing events. Distress in itself does not mean people are not in a good place to speak. But certain reactions may well indicate that people are no longer feeling safe in the conversation. They may dissociate, look for the door, or experience physical reactions similar to those that they had at the time of the attack.

Trauma is a complex *bio-psycho-social* experience; distress is never just one thing – it is a mix of different components. As a media professional you don't need to master the brain science but some basic, introductory insight can help you make better judgements about:

- **How your interviewee is doing and when they might need a break from talking.**
- **How to avoid questioning styles that make you sound like an interrogator and add fuel to difficult emotions such as guilt and shame.**
- **How far you can reasonably rely on the accuracy of somebody's memory of a traumatic event and why you should not push into a gap in their recall.**

Rape is one of the most intensely traumatic experiences any human being can undergo. There are many reasons why survivors may have difficulty finding words for their experiences. Shame and fear of how others react can be big factors in closing down people's ability to talk. And talking about trauma can bring up intense feelings which people can find too painful and exhausting to talk about. Sometimes silence is the best response.

But often the words for things can be hard for a different reason connected to how human memory functions in traumatic situations.

When we are under attack we go into survival mode. Memories are still registered – often in vivid detail – but the brain doesn't necessarily filter and file them away according to the same ordering principles it usually deploys (instead, it is prioritising more fundamental survival systems). It is common for people who have been sexually assaulted to have issues with fragmented and disorganised memory. There may be gaps or inconsistencies in the chronology that they have trouble making sense of. Some things may come back with exceptional force; others may be blanked out or not even laid down in memory in the first place.^[a]

[a] For a useful introduction to the impact of trauma on memory in sexual assault survivors see: G. Smith and S. Heke, 'From Report to Court: Psychology, Trauma and the Law' (2010), available [here](#).

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In practical terms for you as a journalist, this means:

- You shouldn't expect a survivor to give you a perfectly coherent or logical account of what happened. Inconsistency is not evidence of any intent to deceive.
- It is not fair to expect your source to clear up any discrepancies themselves – as they may simply not be able to. If a precise chronology is important, look for other ways of verifying events.
- Circling back and asking a simple clarifying question is usually fine if done lightly. But if you come across a gap or obstacle in someone's memory, do not push into it and dig for information. That may bring something flooding back in a way that is overpowering [see the box below].
- Other people you are working with – for example, editors and fact-checkers – need to be aware of these restrictions too.

Responding to distress

Distress doesn't necessarily show in the way we would expect it to. You may come across people who appear to be unemotional and talk about the most terrible things in a flat, even tone, or others who release tension by laughing in places that feel odd or out of sync to you. These are all natural, well-documented reactions that individuals have in the aftermath of trauma. Treat each person you meet with openness and be careful not to suggest that you think there is a right way of responding.

When people talk about the past, they may re-experience elements of the same emotions and physical sensations that they had during the time (or times) they were attacked. This can be mild and barely noticeable or severe enough to push people beyond their capacity to tolerate those feelings anymore.

If somebody does have a strong reaction – for instance, they become highly agitated, start crying etc – slow things down in your own head before rushing to do anything. Hastily switching off the camera or breaking off the interview can inadvertently shame somebody by implying that they are wrong to have such feelings. Be careful about using physical touch: that can be threatening and destabilising, especially if unexpected. Instead, you can:

- Model calm.
- Say how sorry you are that this happened to them.
- Remind people that they are safe here in the room with you – that it is not happening now
- Ask them what might help them at this moment. Would they like a break from the interview? What do they usually do when they feel like this?

When someone gets lost in a memory

Dissociation is a common survival reaction that switches on during sexual violence. When a situation is overwhelming and there is no realistic way of escape, the brain may make a sudden automatic call to shut things down and allow the mind to separate out as if the attack were not really happening.

Re-telling an experience can cue people back into a sense that the violence is taking place all over again. It is not always easy to tell when someone is feeling unsafe and on the verge of dissociating. But people may start to:

- Zone out, look sleepy, or stop answering questions.
- Complain of feeling hot or break out in a sudden sweat.
- Complain of headaches or physical pain.
- Scan the room for a way out.

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Katy Robjant, a clinical psychologist who works with refugees and CRSV survivors in the DRC and elsewhere offers this advice to journalists on what to do if this happens:

Keep your actions predictable...It's always best to ask permission or let the person know what you're going to do next...The best thing to do is to quickly try to reorient them. Keep talking. Ask things about the here and now, such as, "Can you tell me where you are? Can you describe what the room looks like?" Those kinds of questions will be more helpful than general questions like, "Are you OK?"^[b]

Shame and believability

It is important to understand how easy it is for strong feelings of shame and guilt to emerge in a conversation about sexual violence. This may happen suddenly and appear out of proportion to what is being discussed at any one moment. It is not unusual for people to blame themselves for things that happened to them and that could not possibly be their fault.

And this is not just about the psychology of sexual assault – rape survivors often have to contend with family and community members not believing them, minimising their experience, or accusing them of being to blame in some way.

So be very careful to avoid using any language that might imply either that you don't believe the interviewee or that they are responsible in any way for what happened to them. For this reason, "why" questions can be risky. Interrogators favour them because they are hard to answer and imply guilt. For example, asking someone, "Why were you there at that time?" makes it sound like they shouldn't have been there in the first place.

Questions that seek information about feelings, such as "How did you feel when...?" are also best avoided as they can revive and add fuel to complicated, volatile emotions.

And as discussed previously, take care to avoid asking probing questions that dwell on intimate or physical details of what happened.

If a survivor is convinced of something that you know not to be true or you disagree with and you feel like challenging them, ask yourself if you are really the right person to do so and what purpose that would serve. Sometimes people hold onto certain beliefs as a defence against aspects of an experience that feel too overwhelming to acknowledge.

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