

Trauma-Informed Victim Interviews

5



Learning Objectives



Discuss how victim trauma affects the interview and investigative process.



Use trauma-informed interview questions to facilitate accurate information gathering and build trust with victim.



Write accurate and thorough case reports using the language of nonconsensual sex.



Use proper clearance codes for sexual assault cases.



Trauma-Informed Interviews: Best Practices

Initial victim
interview

Detailed
follow-up
interview



Trauma-Informed Interviews: Best Practices

- Use two full sleep cycles after the incident as a baseline to conduct the detailed follow-up interview.
- With victim's permission, arrange for advocate to attend interview.
- Work with victim to identify a convenient and comfortable interview location.
- Wear attire that will not be perceived as intimidating or threatening by victim.
- Provide contact information.
- Explain next steps and confidentiality.
 - Provide Victim PIN (Virginia specific)



Trauma-Informed Interviews: Best Practices

- Express compassion
- Use open-ended questions
- Listen
- Do not interrupt



Trauma-Informed Interviews: Best Practices

- “I’m sorry this happened to you.”
- “This is not your fault.”
- “You are not alone. How can we help?”
- “Your health and safety are our priority.”



QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE TO TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEWING

Instead of...	Try...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Why did you...?” ✗ “Why didn’t you...?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “When (specific event happened), what were your feelings and thoughts?” ✓ “Are you able to tell more about what happened when...?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Start at the beginning and tell me what happened.” ✗ “How long did the assault last?” ✗ Other questions asking for a chronological account 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Where would you like to start?” ✓ “Would you tell me what you are able to remember about your experience?” ✓ “What are you able to tell me about what was happening before/during/after the assault?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “What were you wearing?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Sometimes we can get valuable evidence from the clothes you were wearing, even if you’ve put them through the laundry. We would like to collect the clothes you were wearing at the time of the assault as evidence. Can we pick up those items at a time and place that is convenient for you?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Why did you go with the suspect?” ✗ “Do you think you led them on?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Can you describe what you were thinking and feeling when you went with the suspect?” ✓ “Did the suspect’s behavior change after you went with them? How did this make you feel?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Why were you out at this time and at this location?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “What are you able to tell me about what brought you to the location at this time/day?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Why didn’t you leave?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Are you able to describe what was happening while you were in... (the room, the car, the house, etc.)?” ✓ “What were your thoughts and/or feelings while you were in... (the room, the car, the house, etc.)?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Did you say no?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “What are you able to recall doing or saying during the incident?” ✓ “How did the suspect respond to your words or actions? Do you remember how that made you feel?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Did you fight back?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “What did you feel like you were physically capable of doing during the incident?” “What was going on in your mind when you realized you were in danger?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Why didn’t you report right away?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Did anything in particular cause you to come tell us about this incident today?” ✓ “Was there someone you trusted to tell about the incident after it occurred? When you told them, what were you thinking and feeling?” ✓ “What were you feeling—physically and emotionally—immediately after the assault?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Did anyone see this happen?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Can you tell me about any people or witnesses who might have seen you and the suspect together or who might have seen the incident?” ✓ “Can you tell me about any people or witnesses who might have seen you after the event?” ✓ “Can you share information with me on any friends/colleagues/ classmates that might have noticed a change in your physical appearance or behavior (withdrawn/sad/angry) after the assault?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✗ “Have you had sex with this person before?” ✗ “Are you dating/in a relationship with this person?” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Has this person done anything like this to you in the past?” ✓ “Can you tell me how this instance was different from previous consensual sexual acts?”



Trauma-Informed Interviews: Best Practices

- “Where would you like to start?”
- “What are you able to tell me about your experience?”
- Allow for an **uninterrupted** narrative.
- Wait until **after** narrative to ask clarifying questions.
- Use victim’s words or descriptions.



Trauma-Informed Interviews: Best Practices

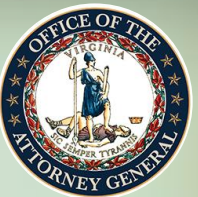
Avoid:

- Questions that start with “why”
- Directives such as “explain to me...”
- Requests for chronological account with prompts such as, “and then what happened?”



Reframing Interview Questions

- Do you remember smelling anything when... happened? Would you tell me more about that?
- If anything, what do you remember hearing during...?
- When..., are you able to tell me about what you were seeing?

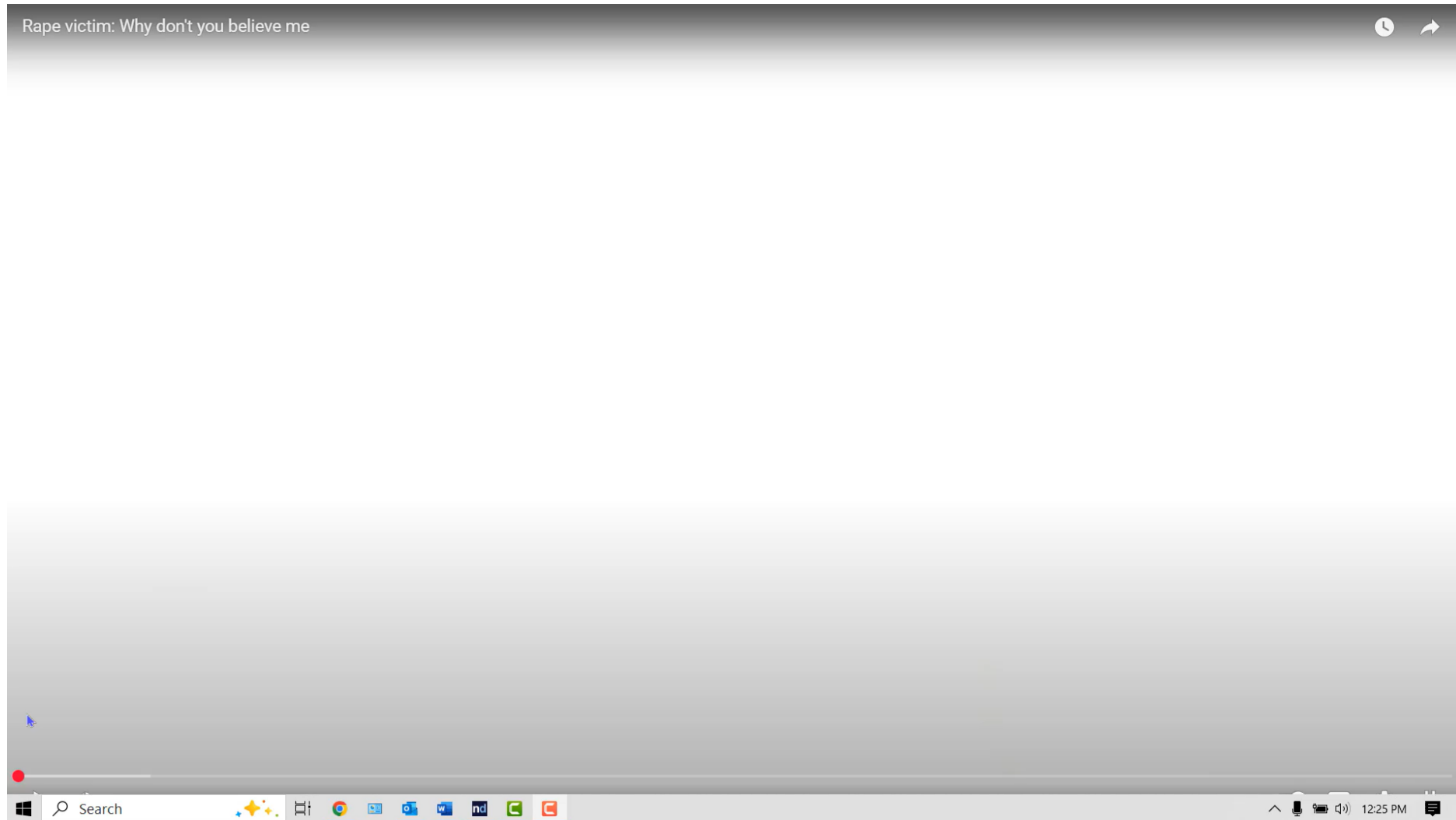


Trauma-Informed Interviews: Best Practices

- Ask about additional senses: **thinking, feeling**
- Emotional memory establishes an element: **fear, force, or coercion**
 - “Would you help me understand what you were thinking when...?”
 - “What were your feelings while you were in (*the room, the car, the house, etc.*)?”
 - What was going on in your mind when you realized you were in danger?”
 - “How did you feel when/after/before ...?”



How NOT to conduct a victim interview



Advocate Suggestions on How You Can Help?

Help them feel safe! Establish trust!

Remember: Victims operate from an *emotional-survival brain* not a rational mind.

- Start by creating an environment of safety and trust from the initial interaction.
 - Soft interview room. Offer coffee, tea, soda, gum, snacks.
 - Find ways to give them back control (ex: “Where would you like to meet?,” “Where would you like to sit?,” “Take your time, there’s no rush.”)
 - Take some time to understand who they are first (ask about family, friends, pets, hobbies)
 - Start by Believing. **Avoid IF phrasing.**
- Level set before interview
 - “If I notice that your anxiety is increasing, we will take a break.”
 - “If you need me to explain, if I am talking too fast, if you don’t understand something, please let me know.”
 - “If you don’t know an answer to my question, I would rather you say ‘I don’t know’ then try to force yourself to remember.”



Advocate Suggestions on How You Can Help? Cont.

Help them feel safe! Establish trust!

- Provide them with psychoeducation; this signals to them that they can trust you.
 - “I took a training on the science of trauma/trauma-informed interviewing for sexual assault survivors. I learned that these symptoms are normal after an event like this.”
- Provide resource packet/pamphlet of local sexual assault & domestic violence program. Local agencies may provide comfort bags, and/or info packets to give to survivors. Get to know your local advocates.
 - “I know the victim advocates at the local SAC. They can help you with safety planning, court accompaniment, they can be a listening ear.”
- Consider **alternative ways** to get information from a victim because they may not want to verbalize what happened to them*:
 - Write it down or drawn a picture (children)
 - “I want to tell what happened, but I want to stare at the wall while I do it.”
 - “I want to tell you what happened, but I want to look down.”



Advocate Suggestions on How You Can Help? Cont.

Help them feel safe! Establish trust!

- If available, consider Crisis Intervention Training (CIT) training.
- Techniques learned in CIT may be used if a victim is triggered or emotionally reliving the event because they are too going through a mental health crisis.
- Crash course:
 - Validate them. (Ex: “This is a tough situation,” “Your anger is understandable.” “You’re not crazy,” “To freeze is a normal response.”)
 - Give them physical space, and breaks. Open body language. Be mindful of body placement.*Limit eye contact.
 - Lower your voice, keep a neutral tone. Allow for silence.
 - Grounding techniques (Ex: Spatial reminder).



Report Writing

- Summarize the content and evidence uncovered during the investigation.
- Describe the tools, objects, or weapons that were used and how they were used.
- Detail the incident in ways that do not minimize or trivialize it.
- Use direct quotes.
- Do not sanitize language.



Perpetrator's behavior:

- Premeditation, grooming, coercion, threats, force, etc.

Traumatic reaction of victim:

- Before, during, and after assault

Victim senses:

- Hear, smell, taste, touch, sight

Additional victim senses:

- Think, feel, fear

Victim's condition:

- Physical injuries, clothes, etc.
- Emotional: freeze, flight, fight, immobility responses



Document What Victim Says

Sensory details explain behavior and/or emotion

- Do not use: ~~*Victim never made any attempt to scream or get away.*~~
- Use victim's exact words: *"I felt like I couldn't move. I was on autopilot, like it was happening to someone else."*

Emotional memory establishes an element: fear, force, or coercion

- Do not use: ~~*Victim stated she didn't do anything to stop him.*~~
- Use victim's exact words: *"When he climbed on top of me, I was afraid he was going to kill me."*



Report Should NOT Include:

Editorializing: *“The 14-year-old victim appeared older than her chronological age.”*

Victim blaming statements: *“Victim willingly drank alcohol with him.”*

Subjective, nondescriptive terms: *“acted strange”, “seemed upset”, “not normal”*

Sanitized or cleaned-up language (if not used by victim): *writing “penis” vs. “dick”*

Consensual language, terms of affection, depictions of mutual participation:
“made love”, “engaged in oral sex”, “hugged”, “cuddled”, “caressed”



Words Carry Meaning

Connotation?

Victim
claims/alleges

Victim's story

Victim
consented

Uncooperative
victim

Victim's delayed
report



Better Choice!

**Victim reports,
says, states**

**Victim's
account**

**Victim
submitted**

**Reluctant or
non-
participatory
victim**

**10 days after the
victim states she
was raped...**



Summary: Trauma-Informed Interviews

- Show compassion and respect.
- Practice active listening.
- Use open-ended questions.
- Ask about all five senses.
- Ask about thoughts, feelings, and emotions.
- Document accurately and thoroughly.
- Use appropriate case code.



Questions?

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