

Trauma-Informed Communication

What to Expect When Interacting with Victims of Sexual Assault and Trauma

The information in this brief applies to cold case sexual assaults as well as current case sexual assaults. Mentions of sexual assault apply to both types of sexual assault cases.

Concepts of Trauma

Understanding certain concepts of trauma allows you to effectively explain patterns of behavior exhibited by victims of sexual assault. During a sexual assault, the brain's prefrontal cortex can be impacted, causing the cognitive portion of the brain to be affected in a way that influences memory, rational thought, and the body's ability to react.

Tonic Immobility

During a sexual assault, the victim's perceived sense of threat can trigger a completely uncontrollable response—known as tonic immobility (TI)—that can include eye closure and paralysis. With TI, a victim may

- ◆ experience an uncontrollable response in extremely fearful situations;
- ◆ have increased self-blame resulting in a decreased likelihood to seek help; and/or
- ◆ be inaccurately attributed with consent, if law enforcement does not understand TI's effect on victims.

Loss of Attention and Details

Victims may not be able to control their focus because of the fear and threat they feel, causing them to put their attention solely on survival. This causes the sequence of events to be poorly remembered and fragmented, which indicates trauma.

Dissociation

Victims may avoid focusing on their assaults as a way to cope with the perceived threat on their lives. This results in dissociation. A victim who experiences dissociation will often describe in great detail the object that became their focal point during their assault. Dissociation can potentially help to corroborate lack of consent by illustrating that the victim experienced trauma.

From Memory to Disclosure: Why Rapport Matters

Understanding how trauma affects memory and emotion is an important aspect of developing better communication with victims of sexual assault. Properly identifying the signs and symptoms of trauma facilitates successful rapport building, which is the first step in conducting effective interviews with victims of sexual assault.

The interview should be a way for the victim to express what their experience was, not what they remember or don't remember. Capturing the trauma and the sensory details of the event can be compelling evidence.¹

Perspective

Keep the victim's perspective in mind by thinking about how it feels for a victim to talk about their assault, and help the victim feel welcomed, accepted, and believed.

Provide a safe environment—both physically and emotionally—so that the victim feels safe enough to disclose. When the victim feels they are in control, that feeling helps their recovery and the success of the case.

Connect and Counteract

- ◆ Understand that a victim's power and choice were taken away during the assault. You are helping to counteract some effects of the assault when you connect with a victim. Small actions on your part can help them restore control (e.g., seating placement, beverage options, interview breaks).
- ◆ Realize that evidence will ultimately take the case where it needs to go. However, a victim should feel confident that they will be talking to someone who believes them—especially in the early stages and initial interactions with investigators.
- ◆ Recognize that an appropriate response to sexual assault is critical; a negative response can exacerbate trauma and delay victim recovery.

- ◆ Treat victims with compassion, respect, and dignity by communicating a message of belief and understanding; this approach creates an atmosphere that allows victims to feel more comfortable and increases the likelihood that they will be open to providing more information.

If victims do not feel comfortable with the interviewer or surroundings, they most likely will not share memories that cause them to feel even more vulnerable.

Tips to Building Rapport

- ◆ Remember that you may be the first contact (physical or emotional) since the assault. Don't take that lightly and look at it as an opportunity to assist in healing.
- ◆ Never stand over a victim when speaking to them; sit down with the victim and make eye contact.
- ◆ Slow down and give the victim time to respond. A victim's ability to recall details may be slow and painful—but with patience, it is possible.
- ◆ Silence is golden; allow the victim to gather thoughts without feeling pressured or rushed.
- ◆ Be deliberate and sincere when contacting a victim; make an effort to connect and foster a sense of trust during your initial contact because this encounter may determine if a victim proceeds with the process.

"Provide a safe environment and be aware of your weapon in proximity to the victim (which is at eye level if you're standing). A weapon may create anxiety; keep this in mind, especially when building initial rapport."

—Tom Tremblay, Chief of Police (Retired)

Victim Reaction

Trauma can lead to victims

- ◆ feeling indifferent to their experiences,
- ◆ having uneven or fragmented recollection of events, and/or
- ◆ being afraid to disclose their experience to anyone.

Victim Demeanor

It is not uncommon for victims to present with

- ◆ varying emotions (including embarrassment and fear), behaviors, and demeanor;
- ◆ self-blame, regardless of circumstances surrounding the assault;
- ◆ changes in affect (flat to hysterical);
- ◆ uncertainty involving medical care, evidence collection, and the investigation; and/or
- ◆ fear of retaliation, the attacker, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or pregnancy.

Information can assist an investigation only if the victim feels comfortable enough to share.

Build Rapport (acknowledge the difficult situation)

Eye Contact (for active listening)

Language (verbal and non-verbal)

Information (it's most useful when it's shared)

Empathy (builds connection with the victim)

Vulnerability (creates stress that impairs recall)

Empower (start by believing)

"Remember, many victim reactions are the result of fear and trauma—not deception."

—Tom Tremblay, Chief of Police (Retired)

National Resources

National Sexual Assault Telephone Hotline:

1.800.656.HOPE (4673)

National Sexual Assault Online Hotline:

<https://hotline.rainn.org/online>

National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1.800.799.SAFE (7233)

Suicide Hotline: 1.800.273.8255

Joyful Heart Foundation: 1.212.475.2026

National Center for Victims of Crime: 1.855.4VICTIM (842846)

Reference

1. Tremblay, Tom (Ret. Chief). *Justice Begins with a Trauma-Informed Response: Trauma-Informed Victim Interviews*. (2017). 2017 National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative Training and Technical Assistance Grantees Meeting. May 18–19, 2017. Arlington, VA.

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