

Handout for “The Art of Trauma” Panel Discussion, ASJA2019

Always employ a compassionate, empathetic, respectful approach.

Believe the survivor.

Additionally, be careful of asking “why” questions — which interrogators tend to favor. Trauma is often associated with high degrees of self-blame, guilt and shame. For this reason, avoid language that might imply the interviewee is responsible in some way.

Use the term “trauma survivor” rather than “trauma victim.” People are not “victims” unless they describe themselves that way. However, know that in the legal context, they must be referred to as “victim.”

Listen closely to the survivor, and do not rush them. Watch their body language. If they become anxious, nervous, start tearing up or breathing faster, for example, take a break. They may need a minute to regain their composure. Or reschedule.

Resist the urge to say, “I understand how you feel.” No matter how much you’ve prepared for an interview, you don’t “get it” or “understand” what a source has been through.

Fully prepare for the interview. Reporting on trauma demands special care and increased ethical sensitivity. It requires specialized interviewing skills, understanding of the law, and a basic awareness about the psychological impact of trauma. (See Rebecca Campbell note below.)

Respect a potential interviewee’s right to say no. Nobody should be forced to give every detail about a traumatic event. They always have the right to say “no.”

Take control of providing a safe, private space for sources to discuss their individual trauma(s).

Don’t underestimate how your own reactions to traumatic details can influence the conversation. If you are finding the conversation challenging, acknowledge that silently to yourself, and bring your focus back to what is being said.

Journalists have a responsibility to do everything they can to avoid exposing the interviewee to further abuse and to avoid undermining an interviewee’s standing in the community.

Remember that trauma reporting is an act for the greater good. Utilize information, data, resources and various experiences wisely to provide you with insight and to ensure you’re reporting the truth — not how things appear at first glance.

Look beyond the trauma. A story is never just about what happened. Explore regrets and successes and how your interviewee’s life led up to this point.

(Partially taken from: “10 rules for reporting on war trauma survivors” by Carmen Noble; See below.)

Excellent Sources for Additional Information

1.) Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, Columbia University Journalism School

<https://dartcenter.org/>

2.) “When interviewing trauma victims, proceed with caution and compassion”

By Sherry Ricchiardi

<https://ijnnet.org/en/story/when-interviewing-trauma-victims-proceed-caution-and-compassion>

3.) “10 rules for reporting on war trauma survivors”

By Carmen Noble

<https://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/reporting/10-rules-interviewing-trauma-survivors>

4.) Covering Sexual Assault

<https://nieman.harvard.edu/articles/covering-sexual-assault/>

5.) RAINN Educates Journalists About Interviewing Survivors of Sexual Assault

<https://www.rainn.org/news/rainn-educates-journalists-about-interviewing-survivors-sexual-assault>

6.) Why Journalists Need to Learn About Trauma

<https://nieman.harvard.edu/articles/why-journalists-need-to-learn-about-trauma/>

7.) Tip Sheet from Columbia Journalism School: Safety and self-care strategies for every beat

https://journalistsresource.org/tip-sheets/journalist_covering_conflict_staying_safe/

8.) “The Trauma of Writing About Trauma: Reporters on the nightmares they get from covering war, racism, and rape”

By Chloe Angyal

<https://newrepublic.com/article/121585/how-writing-about-trauma-can-give-journalists-nightmares-or-worse>

9.) Any articles, research of youtube videos by Rebecca Campbell, PhD, about the neurobiology of trauma as it impacts survivors of sexual violence.