TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVIEWING WITH SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Trauma-informed interviews are "grounded in an **understanding of** and **responsiveness to** the impact of trauma, that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional **safety** for both providers and survivors, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a **sense of control and empowerment**."*

Trauma-informed interviewers:

- **Realize** how prevalent trauma is.
- **Recognize** the potential impact of trauma on all individuals involved in the interview (the interviewee, interpreter, and the interviewer).
- **Respond** by putting this knowledge into practice with the use of deliberate strategies to facilitate trust, respect, hope, and shared power and to gather reliable information.
- **Resist** retraumatization and revictimization of the survivor, and secondary trauma for the interpreter and interviewer.

*Hopper EK, Bassuk EL, Olivet J. Shelter from the storm: Trauma-informed care in homelessness services settings. The Open Health Services and Policy Journal. 2010;3:80–1000).

Principles of Trauma-Informed Interviewing

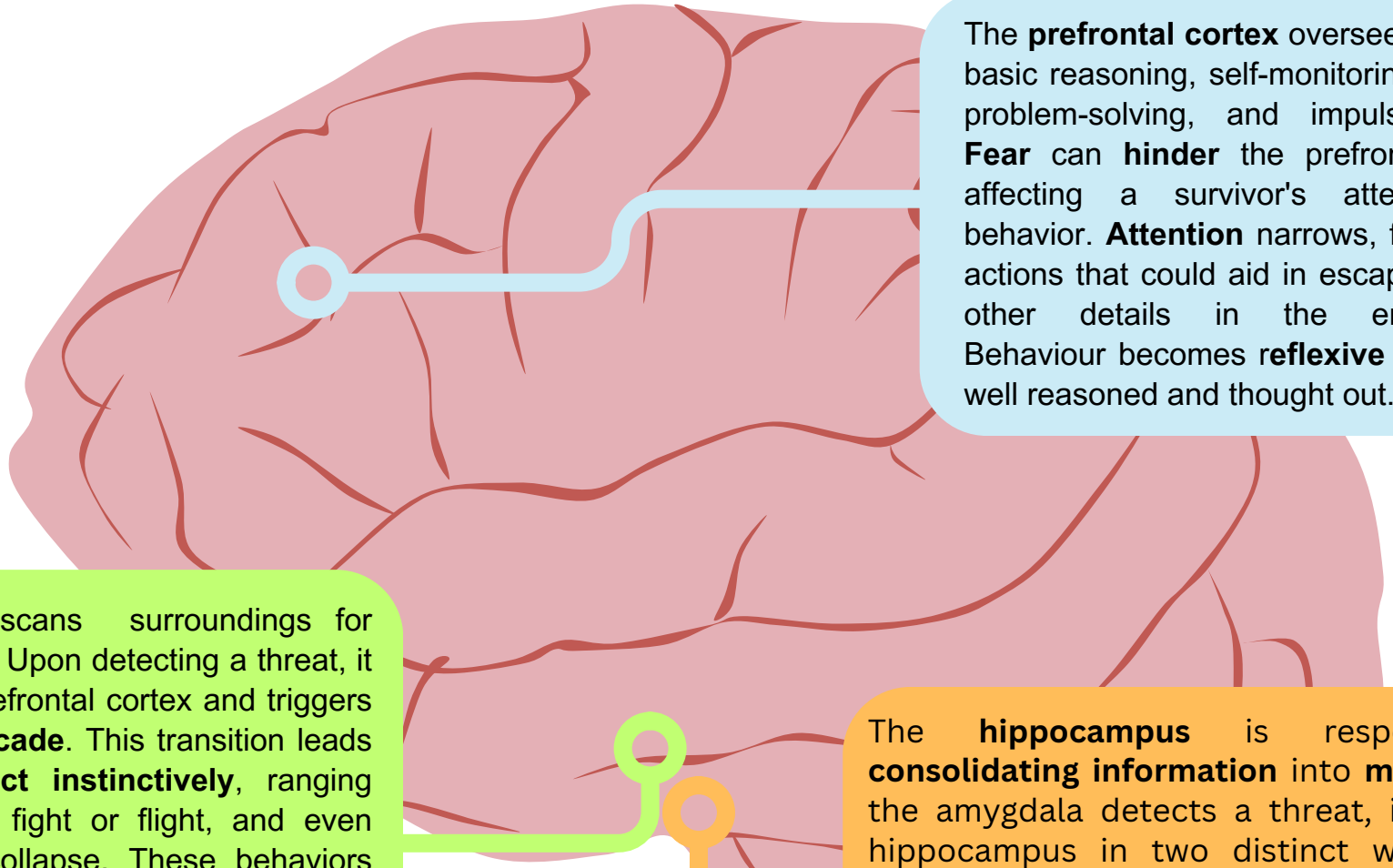
- **Safety**
  - Creating an atmosphere of physical and psychological safety
- **Trustworthiness**
  - Being reliable, predictable, clear and consistent
- **Choice and empowerment**
  - Maximizing interviewee's choice and control over the interview process
- **Collaboration**
  - Working with interviewee to achieve interview aims
- **Exploration of cultural and gender issues**
  - Adopting an attitude of cultural humility and acknowledging gender issues

"Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."

From Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative. SAMHSA's working definition of trauma and guidance for trauma-informed approach. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration; 2012, p. 2.

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Neurobiology of trauma: Three ways fear impacts the brain



The **prefrontal cortex** oversees planning, basic reasoning, self-monitoring, complex problem-solving, and impulse control. **Fear** can **hinder** the prefrontal cortex, affecting a survivor's attention and behavior. **Attention** narrows, focusing on actions that could aid in escape, ignoring other details in the environment. Behaviour becomes r**eflexive** rather than well reasoned and thought out.

The **amygdala** scans surroundings for potential **threats**. Upon detecting a threat, it **overrides** the prefrontal cortex and triggers the **defense cascade**. This transition leads survivors to **react instinctively**, ranging from freezing to fight or flight, and even immobility and collapse. These behaviors are not consciously chosen by survivors, and they may experience feelings of **shame**, **embarrassment**, or encounter criticism for their reactions to sexual violence.

The **hippocampus** is responsible for **consolidating information** into **memory**. When the amygdala detects a threat, it affects the hippocampus in two distinct ways. Initially, after detecting a threat, the hippocampus switches to a **"super-encoding" mode**, potentially resulting in **detailed** recollection of the initial moments of a traumatic event. Very quickly, the hippocampus transitions to a **"minimal encoding" mode**, which can lead to incomplete, fragmented memories of sexual violence that are centered on sensory details and lack narrative coherence.

Trauma-informed interviewing techniques

1 Interviewer-interviewee dynamics

Interviewers need to avoid replicating the victim-perpetrator dynamics that survivors may have encountered during instances of sexual violence. It is crucial for interviewers to empower the interviewee, establish a human connection, aid in regaining control and dignity, demonstrate investigative empathy, offer choices, and provide information on the interview process and investigation steps.

Remember that the survivor has been disempowered and treated as an object by the perpetrator. Showing the survivor dignity and respect, engaging with them empathetically, and empowering them by offering choices and control can help them to fully participate in the interview.

2 Avoiding retraumatization

Interviewers should pay attention to the emotional state of interviewees throughout the interview and be prepared to offer support if interviewees shows signs of undue distress, whether that is hyper-arousal (e.g., panic, uncontrollable crying, agitation), hypo-arousal (e.g., numbing, shut-down, disconnection). or the experience of a flashback memory in which the survivor relives some part of their experience. The following are helpful ways to respond to an interviewee in distress:

- Reassurance:
  - “You are safe” “You are in control”
  - “It’s okay, I can handle this”
- Re-establish connection to you and interpreter
  - “I’m (we’re) right here with you.”
- Acknowledge (or ask) what is happening and give words to the experience
  - “You seem to be having trouble focusing right now.”
  - “What is going on for you right now as we talk about this?”
- Checking in
  - “Is this helping?”“How are you feeling now?”
- Re-orienting the interviewee to the present moment (for flashbacks and hypo-arousal)
- Encouragement to stay present
- Grounding exercises
- Breathing exercises

3 Trauma-informed interviewing techniques

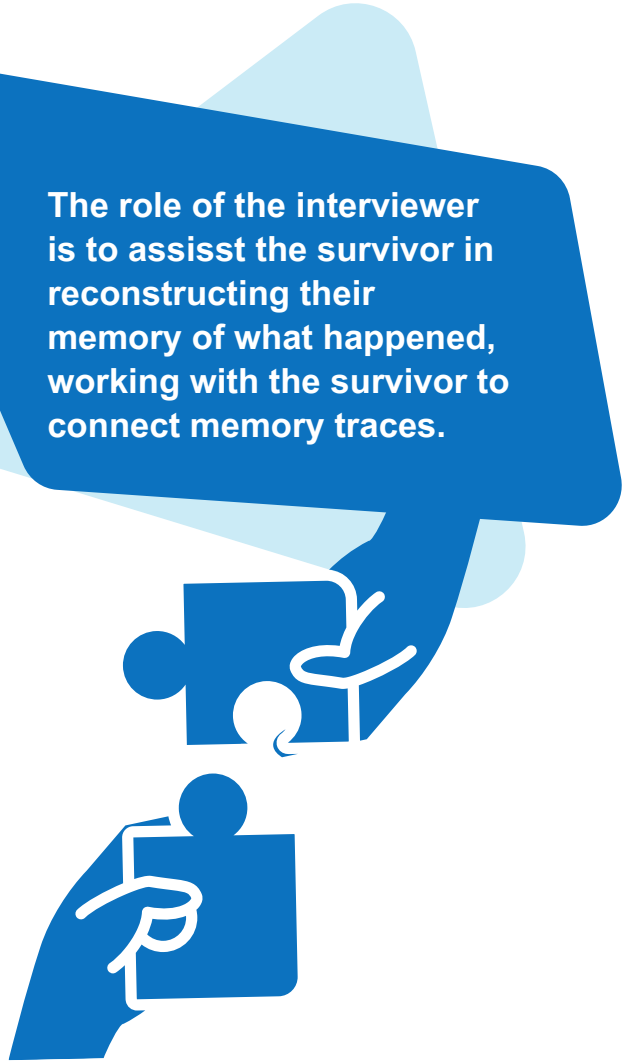
Trauma-informed questions

The phrasing of questions in interviews with survivors of sexual violence is important. How questions are worded can influence what survivors recall about their experiences and how they perceive and are affected by the interview. Questions should be framed in a way that assists survivors in recollecting important details while minimizing the chances of retraumatization and revictimization. Interviewers should keep in mind the following:

- Survivors' memory for sexual violence may be fragmented, with some details remembered clearly and others not remembered at all.
- Survivors may feel guilt or shame for how they responded during sexual violence, particularly if they experienced a freeze or collapse response that prevented them from resisting or if they engaged in reflexive behaviours that they view as inconsistent with sexual violence.
- Survivors may have memory for sensory information without having a context for the memory, e.g., remembering a smell of alcohol without being aware that this is a memory of he perpetrator's breath;
- Central details will be remember more clearly than peripheral details. What is central is determined by the survivor's perspective, rather than the investigative aims. Central details are usually related to the aspects of the experience that were most threatening or frightening to the survivor, such as the look on the perpetrator's face. These details may be clearly remember at the cost of peripheral details (such as time of day, sequence of events).

To conduct interviews sensitively, interviewers should use **open-ended questions**, inquire about **what survivors can recall** (instead of specific details), be ready to **assist survivors in reconstructing their experiences** from fragmented memories, and **refrain from using questions that suggest blame or disbelief**. The examples provided below demonstrate how questions can be rephrased in a trauma-informed manner.

The role of the interviewer is to assisst the survivor in reconstructing their memory of what happened, working with the survivor to connect memory traces.



Questions to avoid	Trauma-informed reframing	Rationale
Tell me what happened.	Would you tell me what you are able to about your experience?	The reframed question serves as an invitation to the survivor, rather than a demand. It sets a supportive tone to the interview, empowering the survivor by giving them control over what they share. It also reduces the pressure on the survivor to recount their experience in a narrative format, which may be difficult for them given the impact of trauma on their memory.
Start at the beginning.	Where would you like to start?	Because of the impact of trauma on memory, it may be difficult for survivors to recount their experience in narrative form using chronological order. The reframed question both empowers the survivor by giving them choice and control, and allows them to share their memory traces in whatever order feels natural to them.
What happened next?	What else do you remember?	The sequence of events is often misremembered even for non-traumatic experiences. This is more pronounced for memories of sexual violence, when the survivor is focused on surviving and may also have gaps in memory due to collapsing or fainting from fear.
Describe the location they took you to.	What can you remember about where they took you?	Survivors may struggle to recall details about locations or other types of evidence if those details were not central to their experience. Reframing the question by focusing on what survivors do remember encourages the survivor to recall as much detail as possible without pressuring them to provide a coherent description. Given space to remember in this way, survivors may be able to recall important details that are relevant to the investigation.

Questions to avoid	Trauma-informed reframing	Rationale
Do you know what kind of gun it was?	What do you remember about the gun?	The reframed question focuses on what the survivor can remember instead of asking for specific details. By focusing on what is remembered, the interviewer can collaborate with the survivor to reconstruct their memory of a weapon, vehicle, location, clothing.
Who was in charge?	What do you remember about their interactions?	The original question encourages survivors to speculate about the relationship among perpetrators, and may lead to incorrect information being shared unknowingly. By focusing on what is remembered, interviewers can avoid influencing survivors' memory of what happened.
What was he wearing?	What do you remember about his clothing?	The original question communicates an expectation about what the survivor should be able to remember. The reframed question eliminates this expectation, recognizing that the perpetrator's clothing may not have been a central detail in the survivor's experience.
Did you report this?	Have you felt comfortable enough to tell anyone else about this?	Lack of reporting or delays in reporting are common among survivors of sexual violence, for a multitude of reasons. The original question could be perceived as disbelieving of survivors who did not report or delayed reporting.The reframed question uses a supportive tone that recognizes the challenges survivors face in reporting and seeking help after sexual violence.
Were there any witnesses?	Can you tell me about anyone who might have seen any part of what happened?	The original question could be perceived by the survivor as expressing disbelief or a lack of trust in their account.