

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEWS

BYU

Understanding Trauma

- In a traumatic situation, the brain can release chemicals that impact the individual's response to the trauma.
- This chemical reaction is autonomic and cannot be controlled.
- Often, the ability to fight or flee is impacted (Tonic Immobility)
 - Sometimes people will say “I froze” and not understand why.
- These same chemical reactions can impact encoding of memories.

Understanding Trauma – Cont.

- We should expect non-linear accounts, jumping around, fragmented memories.
- Executive function can be severely impacted.
- You may see uncontrollable laughter, and it will seem wildly inappropriate, but that's what the chemicals are doing.
- Allowing for one or two sleep cycles between the event and the interview will help immensely.
- Events are connected to strong emotions. Asking how something made them feel will be more effective than asking what happened.

Providing Support

- Make sure the complainant is well aware of support, counseling, and advocacy options.
- Make sure your interview space is comfortable.
- Have water, and maybe something with some sugar available. Tissues, too!
- Location – Make it as private as you can and as appropriate.
- You – Do you wear a suit, or jeans and a polo?
What's best?

Avoiding Additional Trauma

- Prepare them appropriately – Tell them about the tough stuff.
- Avoid judgmental statements
- Be prepared to explain why a question matters before you ask it. Especially when the question is challenging.
- Ask simple questions, even if the interviewee is highly educated.
- Pay attention to body language, if you see someone get anxious, take a break!

Avoiding Additional Trauma – Cont.

- If you ask a question that clearly causes discomfort, withdraw the question, and come back to it later.
- Be careful how you ask questions. Ask in the most non-judgmental way possible. Victims may feel significant guilt for letting something like this happen to them.

Empowerment!

- Give as much control to the interviewee as possible.
- Start with broad open-ended questions.
 - “What can you tell me about what happened?”
 - “Where would you like to start?”
- Follow up questions:
 - “Can you tell me more?”
 - “Can you help me understand more about...”

Closing Thoughts...

- This is a tough job to hear all these stories.
 - Please don't rush anything because you think you've heard it before.
 - Please take care of yourself.