Trauma Informed Interviews
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.