The information that follows is meant to guide investigations when the victim or witness has been traumatized. While the focus is on sexual assault victims, this material can easily be used to guide interviews with other traumatized victims, such as in dating/domestic violence and stalking cases. Feel free to contact either our Sexual Assault Services Coordinator at 703.338.0834 or nova.sas@nvcc.edu or Connie Kirkland at 703.323.2136 or c kir kland@nvcc.edu. We welcome your comments!

What is Trauma?

American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical manual (DSM-IV) defines a “traumatic event” as one in which a person experiences, witnesses, or is confronted with actual or threatened death or serious injury, or threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others. A person’s response to trauma often includes intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Trauma can result from experiences that are ‘private’ (sexual assault, domestic violence, child abuse/neglect, witnessing interpersonal violence) or more ‘public’ (war, terrorism, natural disasters)

-- is a central mental health concern
-- results in a disorganization of the person’s mind
-- causes one to lose his/her ability to process information either short-term or long-term if it is not addressed
-- can affect every aspect of one’s life (health, social, work, relationships, etc.)
-- is linked to depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, hostility, eating disorders, low social skills, poor health, and more victimization
-- negative coping behavior may occur (substance abuse, cutting, isolation, etc.)

Sexual assault causes the **highest level of trauma** of all crimes short of murder.

Lowest to highest = property/burglary/robbery/physical assault/sexual assault

Why? It is more invasive, more personal, least expected, least understood

**Difficulties of processing this trauma…**

-- variations in response may result because of an accumulation of incidents or stress in the person’s life vs. a single incident in a person’s relatively healthy life

-- if the person had many childhood complications, he or she may not be as able to process a new incident
if associated with repeated childhood physical or sexual abuse can become a central
defining characteristic to a survivor’s identity, impacting the person greatly
--age at assault may determine level of trauma
--human brain isn’t completely developed until age 25
--traditional age of students sexual assaulted is between 18 and 22, who come to us with
past experiences, some of which have been traumatic

Following a report of an incident…
--the victim may be still numb
--avoiding the issues that have presented themselves may feel safer
--asking if the victim/survivor wants help isn’t really helpful – refusal is common
--but victims need support from one who understands trauma
--this supportive person can be a friend or family member, but the best person is one who
is not emotionally connected to the victim

Victims and Police Reporting

The police need the information. The victim may not have it all, but he/she will have more than
anyone else.

Ultimately both the victim and the police department have the same goal – catch this person
before he/she victimizes someone else.

Officer’s job = gather as much information as possible – time, place, names of potential
witnesses, name or description of suspect, etc.

How to get this information? Work with the victim, not against.

- Offer support and provide comfort
  o Thank the person for coming to the station
  o Emphasize that it is not his/her fault
  o Show patience – Do not rush the victim. It is common for traumatized
    individuals to have trouble with recollection or concentration. Repeat a
    question or statement without losing patience.

- Demonstrate acceptance
  o Do not judge – keep your personal opinions, beliefs, morals in your head
  o Avoid facial expressions – If you make a face after he/she reveals a detail and
    your face resembles that of a person who has just been startled like never
    before, you will cause the person to shut down.

- Use reflective listening
  o Avoid being directive
  o Avoid expressing an opinion even when asked
- Avoid asking questions that put emphasis on ‘you’ (the victim), see examples
  - Listen more than you speak – often times you will get the answers to your questions just by allowing the person tell his/her story. Note that if you interrupt a story, he/she may lose her train of thought.
  - If you would like more information on something he/she said, reflect what you think they said and ask them to elaborate. “You mentioned … , and I’m wondering ….” Or “Earlier, you said you felt …, what did you mean by that, or can you help me understand that better?”

- Use open communication: no one likes to be interviewed, so keep in mind, not just an interview, but an interview on the world’s least favorite topic!
  - Give the interview the feel of a conversation as opposed to an interrogation. Instead of Question/Answer, Question/Answer, let it flow more like a discussion.
  - Focus on the issue at hand. If the person had broken a law either prior to or during what took place, he/she may leave out information. If you make it clear you are here to discuss the groping or the rape, and not the fact that he/she consumed alcohol underage or used a fake ID to purchase alcohol or enter a bar, then your rapport will be stronger and you are likely to get more information.

Although it is not an officer’s job to cuddle the victim it is important to note that the inability to bond or build rapport with the victim will hurt both the investigation and the officers’ relationship with that victim. Remember, you share the same goal!

Instead of working against one another, the two parties should work together. However, given the nature of the crime and what the individual has gone through, it would be unfair to have high expectations of the victim. This means that the burden falls on the officers and their ability to make the victim feel safe and comfortable enough to provide the details necessary for them to do their job effectively.

If the victim does not feel safe, secure and comfortable with the officers he/she may

- Leave, or ask that you not to carry on investigation
- Ask for your contact information to discuss this another day and never call you back
- Change his/her tone, suddenly giving you one word or phrase answers such as yes, no or I don’t know.

Simple things such as offering the person some water or giving them a break during an interview go a long way – especially when you begin to notice a change in demeanor (they go from sitting up right to slouching, or from making eye contact to avoiding eye contact with you, etc.)

Do not be directive, but be direct
Instead of referring to a crime as “it,” refer to it as it actually is – rape, fondling, groping, sodomy, etc. Referring to any of the above as “it” may give the sense that you are uncomfortable discussing the topic.

**Asking Questions**

It is understood that certain questions have to be asked and answered. Take a look at how a simple rewording of a question will get you the answer you need while still maintaining a good relationship with the victim.

It is not a matter of NOT asking the necessary questions, but rather asking them differently so that they are still effective in getting you the information you need, while keeping the victim engaged and willing to give the information. One poorly worded question can derail an interview, and once you lose the victim (whether trust or interest or relationship wise), it is extremely difficult to get him/her back.

**First consider an introduction like this:**

“I understand this is a difficult topic to discuss and I appreciate you coming here today to report this rape. In order for me to do my job I will need to ask questions, some of which will be graphic and I apologize. If you feel that we need to stop at any point or if you would like me to reword or repeat a question please do not hesitate to ask. I am here to help you and I appreciate your willingness to share information with me.’

**Original Question – What were you wearing at the time?**

In most cases, this is unnecessary, but there may be rare incidents where this is a valid question – like if you are trying to determine whether this crime is connected with the 6 reported rapes in a neighboring county where a man of a certain description targets only women with their hair down and a certain color, wearing a short dress or skirt of a certain color or style, or a certain type of jeans of a distinct color.

**Asking this question as is will destroy rapport.** While in your head, you are asking with good intentions, what the victim may take away is that you are evaluating her role in the act – how did she contribute or how responsible is she for what took place.

**Consider the following possibilities:**

1) **Was there a struggle to remove your clothes?**

   - Possible responses
     - No, I was at home in my sweat pants. He just pulled them right off.
     - No, no clothes were removed. I was wearing a dress and he just pulled it up.
o Yes, I was wearing a belt and skinny jeans, he had a hard time getting them off, but when he threatened/began choking me, I helped him remove them.

2) I am trying to get a better understanding of what took place, and again I know this is difficult to discuss and I appreciate you being open with me. I do need as much information as possible to work this case. I am wondering what item of clothing was removed first, and how?

- Possible responses
  o Well I was wearing a dress so that was the only thing to take off
  o I took off my shoes because we were going to lay on the couch and watch a movie together, but then he began to undress me. He unclipped my bra from over my shirt – etc.

You just answered the question what were you wearing, without asking “what were you wearing?”

Original Question: Anything regarding a boyfriend – did he resemble your boyfriend or ex-boyfriend?

While you may be asking this question to narrow the focus of your investigation, or to determine where to begin your investigation, the victim may take this as implying or questioning her role in what took place – as if you are checking whether she may have done something wrong to the boyfriend which resulted in him doing this to her.

Again, because you are working with the victim to reach a common goal, it is important to always think about how your question will be received by the victim. If not received well, you risk not being able to complete the investigation.

Consider asking this question differently.

Did you recognize this person/ was this person someone you know? You may want to define the question for her by saying something like “and by that I mean had you seen this person before whether in class, at work, on campus, in your apartment, or a person you know such as a friend, relative, boyfriend, girlfriend etc.” This way you are not singling out the boyfriend question, but rather asking if the person fits into one of these categories.

Avoid asking questions which put emphasis on ‘you’ (the victim)

Did you …?
Why didn’t you …?
What were you …?
How did you …?
This may imply the victim is to blame, at least partially, for what took place. Often times victims already feel at fault, and it is most helpful on both the police and advocate ends to reassure them they are not at fault.

**What does a victim look like? How should a victim react?**

There is no answer to this question. There is no “look” to a victim or someone who has been traumatized.

**Possible reactions include -**

- Screaming
- Crying
- Irritability
- Laughing (when talking about certain things)
- Silence
- Shaking/Trembling

Do not dismiss a person because they do not fit your definition of “victim” or “traumatized.”

Do not judge based on appearance. You do not know how they dressed or what they sounded like before they were victimized, so you cannot make a fair assessment regarding changes in that person if you only met them after the fact. Maybe they’ve always only showered once a week, may be they have always been extremely quiet.

Keep in mind that statistics from police departments nationwide indicate that only 4 to 8 percent of reported sexual assaults are false or unfounded reports. Given that it is the least reported crime, it is more likely than not that the person before you is telling the truth.

**Triggers**

Certain questions may be triggering to a victim and you may notice a change in behavior or comfort.

If a person begins to cry offer support and reassurance, do not keep pressing for the answer to the question.

- Use phrases such as “I know this is difficult for you, you are doing a good job”
- Offer a break – “would you like to stop for a few minutes?”
- Offer water or tissues
- Reassure him/her this is not their fault
- Explain the purpose of asking the question or how important it is to your investigation and offer to come back to it. “This is a difficult topic to discuss, I appreciate all you have told me today. Would you like me to come back to this one later on? Or how can I make this more comfortable for you?”