

Covering Breaking News: Interviewing Victims and Survivors

A DART CENTER TIP SHEET FOR COLLEGE MEDIA ADVISORS, EDITORS AND STUDENT JOURNALISTS

Interviewing victims and survivors of a traumatic event requires sensitivity, empathy and tact.

People who have experienced a traumatic event may exhibit a wide variety of emotions, reactions and physical pain, and journalists need to be aware of this throughout the interview process.

As a college media advisor, editor or student journalist, it's important to know that how you conduct an interview can impact an interview subject's frame of mind, since, in most cases, everything around them has changed dramatically. You should make every effort to minimize harm to your subject and yourself. Being thoughtful and careful throughout the whole interview process is key.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Do your research before going out into the field. Arrive at the scene knowing what happened and how it has impacted people in the vicinity. Being an informed reporter will make you an informed interviewer.

Talk with your editor or advisor beforehand. Before heading out to the scene, discuss a plan for news gathering and interviewing. He/she may have additional advice to give you; you can also inform them of your plans and discuss any concerns you have.

Be careful of your surroundings. When you arrive at the scene, be sure the area is clear and safe. Ask yourself if you need to take shelter or find a place of safety. Traumatic events can last minutes, hours, days or weeks and you must ensure your personal safety before beginning your reporting.

Check in with your editor or advisor. Don't forget to make contact with your editor or advisor when you arrive at the location and before you do the interview(s). You want to assure them that you are in a safe place, especially if there are safety risks associated with the event.

Be ready for the long haul. Depending on where the traumatic event occurred (on-campus or off-campus) and the weather conditions at the time of the event, bring some basic supplies (e.g. water, rain gear, hat, extra batteries, etc.) with you in case you are posted to a spot for many hours.

Be careful when you approach sources – be transparent, calm and soft-spoken. Identify who you are, what organization you represent, what will happen with the information you collect from the interview, how it might be used in the story and when it will appear in publication. Tell them why you want to talk with them. If they are open to an interview, then proceed. If not, then leave your contact information with them and ask them to contact you anytime if they would like to talk. If they are not interested in talking, or willing to speak on the record, there will be another opportunity to find another source.

Make sure your interview subject doesn't need medical attention – Before jumping into questions, first ask if they need any medical attention and inform them of the ways they can get this attention.

Let the interview subject have some control. People who have undergone a traumatic situation often seek ways to regain control in their lives. One way to honor this is to give them a chance to make some decisions in the interview process – for example, where they would like to sit and what photos or images they would prefer that you to use. You might also let them to tell you when they want to stop or take a break. These small steps can go a long way.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Be sincere when meeting with victims and survivors. Don't patronize. Don't ask "How do you feel?" or say "I know how you feel," – because in most cases nobody truly knows what somebody else is going through. Be supportive in the way you communicate.

Consider empathic interviewing. Empathy is the capacity to participate in another's sensations, feelings, thoughts, and movements. **Using specific words can make a difference in the interview and in how**

your interview subject responds. The premise of empathic interviewing shows the source your interest, attentiveness and care in telling their story. Such responses include:

- "So what you're saying is..."
- "From what you're saying, I can see how you would be..."
- "You must be..."

Ochberg Fellow Kelly Kennedy suggests several other tips for the interview process:

- **Give ample time for the interview** – you may need more time than you think.
- **Record the interviews** so you can always go back and listen – in case you missed something in your notes.
- **Don't rush into the hard questions first** – ask softer questions before getting to the harder ones.
- **Don't take things personally.** Sometimes sources may be going through interpersonal responses to trauma and may not be showing you signs in the interview of interaction – don't take this personally, it may be the way they are dealing with the situation.

More resources:

- [Empathic Interviewing Techniques](#)
- [Working with Victims](#)
- [Interviewing Victims: Ethics and Practice](#)
- [Self-Study Unit 1: Journalism and Trauma](#)
- [Self-Study Unit 4: The First 24 Hours](#)

Interview details can be hazy. Interview subjects may experience memory loss, and may not remember all of the details of what happened – don't pressure them to remember. It may come in due time. Corroborate information with other sources as you would for any kind of news story.

POST-INTERVIEW

Check in with your advisor or editor. Don't forget to make contact when you complete your interview(s). You want them to know you are safe.

Don't rush to publish. When it's time to write the story, especially breaking news, it can be a natural reaction to rush it (e.g. get a few anecdotes and throw the story together.) If you have time, use it. Review your notes, listen to the interview recording carefully and don't hesitate to call back your source to confirm or verify information.

Your story does have impact. The story you write about the people you interview will be an article your sources keep forever as a memento and historical artifact. Be aware of how you tell the story and know that the story will impact the people you interviewed and others impacted by the traumatic event.

Talk with your friends, family, advisor or editor. Don't bottle up your feelings. Don't forget that covering a traumatic event can impact you too – be sure to find ways to talk about the experience with your friends, family, advisor or editor. They may have covered something similar and/or can just be a listening ear. You should not keep your emotions bottle up; sharing your experience is one way of coping with witnessing and reporting on such a difficult event.