



# Comprehensive Victim Interviewing (CVI)

Helping Victims Retrieve and Disclose Traumatic Memories

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## Sexual Assault Dynamics: Effectively Recognizing and Responding to Sexual Assault

Those of us working in the field of sexual assault are painfully aware of the stereotype of "real rape" and the way that it so often harms victims. "Real rape," as originally described by Susan Estrich (1987), depicts the stereotype of an assault by a stranger, committed with a weapon and a great deal of physical force. The victim is chaste and responds to the assault with tearful hysterics and a prompt report to police.

Sadly, those victimized by sexual assault continue to be judged in comparison to this artificial standard – and the less their case resembles the stereotype the more likely they are to be viewed with doubt and/or blame. Even professionals are not immune to the power of this stereotype. We see its effects in the perceptions of 911 call takers, police officers and investigators, advocates, prosecutors, judges, jurors, and others.

This workshop will identify how professional responses can be affected by this "real rape" stereotype and explore how to overcome these negative effects. The goal is to ensure that law enforcement and others respond appropriately to sexual assault.

### **As a result of this session, participants will be better able to:**

- Identify the unique challenges faced by 911 call takers, police officers, and investigators, when responding to and investigating crimes of sexual assault.
- Discuss realistic characteristics of sexual assault and highlight the contrast with cultural stereotypes of "real rape."
- Demonstrate proper law enforcement responses to crimes of sexual violence, to overcome cultural misconceptions and improve responses to survivors.

## Understanding Trauma Impacts on Behavior and Memory: Implications for Victim Interviewing

Victim credibility is often judged based on the information they are able to provide during an investigative interview. But traumatized individuals experience various impacts on behavior and memory that many professionals – and most victims themselves – do not understand. Regardless of whether it is conducted by law enforcement, Title IX investigators, or others, the purpose of any investigative interview is to facilitate memory *retrieval* and *disclosure*. It is important to understand these complex dynamics, to reduce the stress victims experience and improve interviewing practices. This session will briefly explore the impacts of trauma on the brain and body, including responses to a threat such as sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, and other traumatic incidents. Research will also be reviewed on the resilience of memory, and best practices for conducting interviews with both victims and suspects.



Taken together, these findings can help transform the way interviews are conducted, allowing us to become truly “trauma informed” in our investigative practices.

**As a result of this session, participants will be better able to:**

- Explain how behavior and memory processes can be impacted during a traumatic event.
- Explore research on the resilience of memory regarding naturalistic life events.
- Describe how memory retrieval and disclosure can be facilitated during victim interviews.
- Examine research identifying best practices for interviewing victims and suspects.

**Meeting Victims Where They Are: Opening Doors by Translating Trauma-Informed Principles into Practice**

In this session, Senior Investigator Stegner demonstrates how to approach sexual assault interviews, based on case facts and the needs of each survivor. The presentation features videorecorded interviews with actors portraying victims.

The focus of these interviews is on the investigator’s trauma-informed approach rather than the information a victim might provide about their sexual assault. The investigator therefore demonstrates key principles for effective victim interviewing, like: (a) Establishing rapport, trust, and safety for victims; (b) Meeting victims where they are, and allowing them to set the pace of the interview; (c) Explaining the process of a law enforcement investigation, and offering reporting options; (d) Not asking victims about “pressing charges” or pressuring them to participate in an investigation or possible prosecution; (e) Making it clear that victims who are not ready to participate in an investigation at this time can decide to do so later.

**As a result of this session, participants will be better able to:**

- Identify specific strategies for applying trauma-informed principles while interviewing a sexual assault victim based on specific case facts and individual victim needs.
- Evaluate concrete examples demonstrated in videorecorded mock interviews.
- Prepare to conduct effective interviews with victims of any traumatic incident

**Effective Report Writing: Using the Language of Non-Consensual Sex**

Most sexual assaults reported to law enforcement are not successfully prosecuted, even though the facts and evidence may warrant it. Prosecutors often argue that police reports are severely lacking while law enforcement argues that prosecuting attorneys want a sure win. No matter how good an investigation is, the prosecuting attorney may not feel confident filing criminal charges if the reports summarizing the investigation are incomplete or inaccurate. Or the prosecutor may file charges, but the defendant may be acquitted if the police reports summarizing the investigation are poorly written. A good report is more than an accurate summary of the facts. A good report anticipates potential defense strategies and provides the information necessary to address them.



This session is designed to help investigators write a report that will support successful prosecution where the facts and evidence warrant. After outlining the many purposes of a report, the session offers concrete recommendations for effective report writing.

**As a result of this training, participants will be better able to:**

- Examine common report writing mistakes through a specific case example.
- Describe how effective report writing can avoid such mistakes, by more accurately capturing statements made by victims, suspects, and witnesses.
- List report writing techniques that successfully support the successful prosecution of sexual assault, where the facts and evidence warrant.

### **Effective Victim Interviewing: Learning from Mistakes and Applying Trauma-Informed Principles in Practice**

For victims who report sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, and other traumatic crimes, the purpose of an investigative interview is to help them: (1) *retrieve* details of the traumatic event from memory, and (2) *disclose* those details to the investigator. Yet all too often sexual assault victims have faced unjustified suspicion that their report is a false allegation. This session examines the scenario where victims summon the courage to report a sexual assault, only to be disbelieved, mistreated, and later charged with false reporting or associated crimes such as obstruction of justice, interfering with law enforcement, or providing false statements.

This presentation will explore how these scenarios can unfold, to highlight failures that have been far too common historically. Discussion will then pivot to describing effective strategies and techniques for interviewing victims of traumatic crimes. This includes a videotaped interview with a sexual assault victim conducted by an expert law enforcement investigator following best practices, including accompaniment by an advocate. With dramatic twists and turns, this interview demonstrates the transformative power of a good interview conducted by a skilled and compassionate investigator.

**As a result of this session, participants will be better able to:**

- Describe the scenario where an individual reports being sexually assaulted to law enforcement and is ultimately charged with false reporting or associated crimes.
- Evaluate the impact of coercive interrogation tactics on sexual assault victims.
- Identify strategies for preventing these scenarios, including best practices for Comprehensive Victim Interviewing and thorough sexual assault investigations.
- Explain the transformative power of well-conducted interviews on victims of crime.

### **Comprehensive Victim Interviewing (CVI) and Evidence-Based Sexual Assault Investigations**

Crime scenes include elements that are probative to an investigation, as well as aspects that are irrelevant, unclear, or even contradictory. In other words, they do not present facts in a linear or logical way – nor do they outline how the information and evidence fit



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together to corroborate the elements of a criminal offense. Rather, investigators collect and document evidence from the crime scene, and then through analysis, evaluation, and further investigative steps, they piece together an understanding of what happened. *The same is true for victim interviews.* After helping victims to recall and share details about their sexual assault, investigators must piece these details together with other information and evidence, to compile a linear and evidence-based account of the crime.

Comprehensive Victim Interviewing is critical to this information-gathering process, yet it requires a great deal of work by investigators before, during, and after the interview. This session focuses on:

- Conducting an initial interview and preliminary investigation
- Planning, preparing, and conducting an in-depth victim interview
- Documenting victim statements and other investigative findings, and
- Following up with additional interviews and an evolving investigation

**As a result of this session, participants will be better able to:**

- Identify key strategies to support the victim's *recall* and *disclosure* of traumatic memories in the context of Comprehensive Victim Interviewing.
- Apply both scientific and practical knowledge to the tasks of planning, conducting, documenting, and following up on Comprehensive Victim Interviewing.
- Examine how Comprehensive Victim Interviewing fits into the larger context of ever-evolving and evidence-based investigations of sexual assault and other crimes.

