

Trauma Informed Interviewing

Being interviewed can be a vulnerable experience regardless of whether someone has experienced trauma. Multiple things contribute to interviews being inherently stressful. The interviewer is in a position of power over the interviewee. There can be a lot put on the table, even if questions aren't specifically about the interviewee. The interviewee is at risk of being judged, evaluated for their truthfulness, accuracy of information being told, not knowing enough or too much, and fear of embarrassing themselves. Trauma history can compound these stressors and be particularly challenging. Vulnerability to shame, embarrassment, and loss of power can activate a trauma response, making people who have experienced trauma feel unsafe.

Stress or trauma responses can be misinterpreted during an interview. Below are some common behaviors that can be misinterpreted:

Cognitive	Affective	Social	Behavioral
Asking questions to be repeated => Slower information processing, memory deficits	Not interested => Managing stress through avoidance	Quirky => Verbal and nonverbal communication challenges	Restless, moving often => Trying to metabolize adrenaline through movement
Scattered, questioning => Attention control problems, hypervigilance, confusion	Dramatic => Affective dysregulation, volatility	Laughing and joking randomly => using humor to ease tension and stress	Slow, withdrawn => Moving inward to avoid stressor

Utilizing trauma informed care in interviewing cannot guarantee trauma responses won't happen or eliminate everything that can contribute to a stress response. However, it can buffer the impact of such a response and guide interviewers to act accordingly. Below are some considerations and tips for trauma informed interviewing.

Considerations

Reflect on the purpose of the interview. Consider if you already have the information you need or if the interview can be shortened/tailored to the interviewee. Additionally, because interviews are inherently extractive, consider what benefit the interviewee gets from being interviewed. (Interviews that serve some benefit to the interviewee, even if simply offering information, can help interviewees gain a sense of control and buy-in.)

Reflect on the structure of the interview. Consider if questions need to be said word for word or if they can be adapted to the interviewee. (Interviews that are more like a curious conversation instead of a formal questioning can make it seem less like an interrogation.)

Reflect on the location of the interview. Consider if the environment is in an appropriate location, such as a quiet, private space. Evaluate if the space feels overwhelming, has distractions, is noisy, and the nature of the lighting. For seating positions, encourage the interviewee to sit wherever they feel

comfortable, ideally where both parties have equal access to exits. If the interview is over Zoom, you can do similar evaluations with your background, lighting, and audio.

Tips by the Principles of Trauma Informed Care

Below are some examples of how the principles of trauma informed care can appear in interviewing. Please note that the principles of trauma informed care are intended to offer guidelines for buffering trauma responses. It can be a balancing act to implement them all at once. For example, you might need to give up aspects of transparency for safety.

When reviewing the principles and the considerations on the previous page, please remember to consider yourself as the interviewer in this process. Check in with yourself if you are feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or confused at any point of the interview.

Principle	Interview Tips & Scripts
Safety	<p>The big question for safety is always safe for whom? Suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Checking in (Before we get started, is there anything here that feels stressful or worrisome? For example, if it feels too noisy here, we can change locations.) ○ Assessing risk (Just so you know, the goal of this interview is to learn about this organization. This won't impact your job/services here.) ○ Offer a way out (Let me know if you ever want to take a break.) If you notice the interviewee seems stressed (I'm noticing this question might be hitting a little differently. We can pause the questions and sit with that a bit if you like or take a break.) ○ Expectations (I'm going to be going through XYZ topics, and I know you might not have as strong of a connection to all of them. If we ever come across a question that you don't know much about, we can always skip it.) ○ Hold space and validate (I noticed this topic was stressful to talk about. How are you holding up? That sounds tough.)
Trust & Transparency	<p>Transparency and trustworthiness can go hand in hand. Suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Informed consent (We are meeting because...I'm hoping to learn...) ○ Share a little about yourself (I joined this team to learn more about XYZ. It's an important topic to me.) ○ Warm up (Feel free to be curious about the interviewee beyond the questions. Sometimes people prefer to get to know one another before diving in.) ○ Be clear about you will be managing the structure and your own limitations (I'm going to try to keep myself accountable to the hour mark...I can't guarantee this will happen...I try to write notes so it isn't clear who the interviewee was. If you like, you can review the notes I've taken to make sure they don't have anything that can lead back to you.) ○ Be clear of the requirements of your job. (If you are required to read questions word for word, let them know!)

Peer Support	<p>The interview can include a peer when providing feedback. Suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Offering focus group or interview pairs as other ways to provide the information you're seeking ○ Check in if the interviewee would like to do the interview with someone else
Collaboration & Mutuality	<p>The interview process has mutuality. Suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Consulting potential interviewees in the development of interview guide ○ Involving potential interviewees in responses and structural changes from feedback ○ Be open to new information that might be relevant ○ Value diverse perspectives, be open to new ideas and feedback
Empowerment Voice & Choice	<p>The interview process prioritizes empowerment, choice, and control. Suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ It is clearly communicated what will happen to answers provided. ○ Interviewees feel validated in their experience when providing answers. (Am I hearing right that this was really hard for you? When you said X, an image of XYZ came up in my mind. Thank you for sharing that.) When validating, be mindful of not oversharing or turning the discussion to you. ○ Interviewees are asked how they would like their information managed. (My goal for this interview is to write a report that represents all the information we've gathered. Is there anything we talked about today that you'd like not included or worded differently?)
Cultural, Historical, & Gender Responsivity	<p>Though the TIC principle emphasizes <i>responsivity</i>, because an interviewer might not know everything about the interviewee, it might be easier to change <i>responsivity</i> to <i>humility</i>. Suggestions include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ No jargon! Use plain, clear language ○ Asking what name they go by (Do you go by Jack or rather I call you something else? Do you have pronouns you use?) ○ Ask for feedback if you notice something isn't going well (That last question felt off to me. When I asked XYZ, I felt some discomfort. How are you feeling?) ○ When taking notes, let them know. Show them your screen if possible. ○ Be open to new perspectives and ask clarifying questions if needed