

ONE THING

INCORPORATING TRAUMA-INFORMED PRINCIPLES IN ALL INTERVIEWS



Trauma-informed interviewing is vitally important for investigative interviewers, as it recognizes and adapts to the profound effects trauma can have on the brain and memory. Understanding that victims, witnesses, and even suspects may all be impacted by trauma is crucial. By employing a trauma-informed approach, interviewers can create a safer and more supportive environment, ensuring they obtain the most reliable information while minimizing harm to those involved.

Six Guiding Principles for Being Trauma-Informed

Suggested by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Association (SAMHSA)

- Safety: What makes your subject feel unsafe, physically or emotionally?
- Trustworthiness and Transparency: Does your subject know they can trust you?
- Collaboration and Mutuality: Is your subject an equal part of the conversation?
- Empowerment, Voice, and Choice: Are you helping your subject regain their agency?
- Peer Support: Does your subject have somewhere to go after the interview?
- Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues: Are there social factors that make it harder for your subject to recover?

([Psychology Today](#), Katherine King, Psy. D)


HIGHLIGHTS

- The guiding principles for being trauma-informed
- Why interviewers should incorporate them
- Adapting the cognitive interview format



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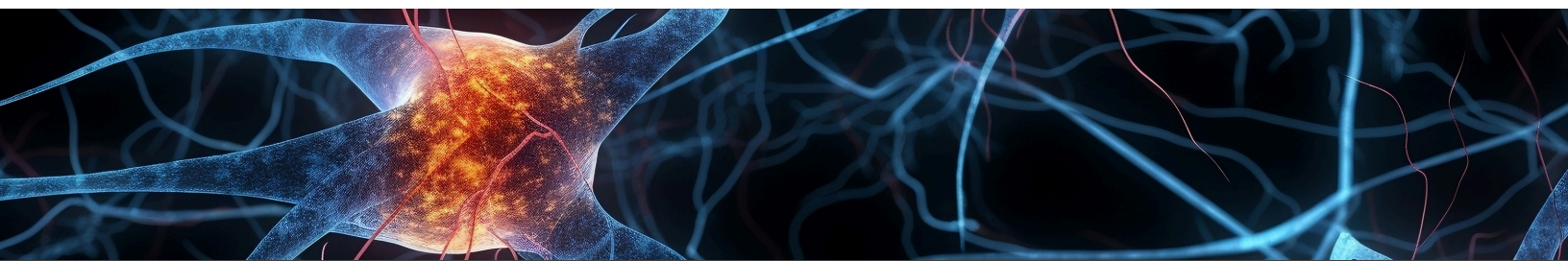
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WHY INCORPORATE TRAUMA-INFORMED PRINCIPLES

1. It's the right thing to do, for victims, witnesses, AND suspects.
2. Acknowledges and respects the experience of those interviewed.
3. People generally don't want to be involved in investigations – let's not make it worse than necessary.
4. Gives those interviewed a voice.
5. Focuses on empowerment.
6. Allows for the greatest possibility of recall.
7. Understanding the brain helps the interviewer ask the right questions.
8. Helps avoid contamination issues in suspect interviews.
9. Courts are starting to pay attention to brain science.



ADAPTING THE COGNITIVE INTERVIEW FOR TRAUMA

Cognitive Interview:

1. Introduction
2. Open-Ended Narration
3. Probing Memory Techniques
4. Summary Statement
5. Closing

Cognitive Interview Adapted for Trauma:

1. Introduction
2. Open-Ended Narration (Free Recall)
3. Sensory Recall
4. Recall by Segments
5. Final Verification
6. Conclusion



**READY TO TAKE
THE NEXT STEP?**

WZ's [Trauma-Informed Interviewing](#) live virtual seminar gives you the tools to interview subjects without causing re-traumatization



What is only now gaining traction is the research into traumatic stress and incidents in the traditional workplace where most people spend their careers. Terrorist attacks, the #MeToo movement, and a spike in workplace violence focused attention on the issue of trauma in the workplace, but traumatic incidents that Human Resource and Loss Prevention/Asset Protection executives and professionals might need to address go beyond just those instances. Sexual harassment's individual and organizational impact has been well documented, but there is also workplace bullying both in-person and online. Civil unrest has resulted in retail and restaurant workers finding themselves and their establishments targeted. Robberies and burglaries can violate an employee's perception of a safe work environment. An employee who is caring for a terminally ill family member can experience trauma that will affect the workplace and require HR support. The ability to conduct quality interviews with individuals who may be experiencing psychological trauma is vital to investigating and addressing these issues.

The Cost of Trauma

There is a compelling business case to be made for conducting quality workplace investigations in a trauma-informed manner and building a supportive culture. Primarily, it is just the right thing to do. Most people enter a career looking for job satisfaction, career growth, and the ability to provide a comfortable life for themselves and their families. Traumatic stress was never a career goal. Human empathy should dictate that we treat people facing workplace trauma with respect and sensitivity, and make every effort to minimize re-traumatization with the investigative process.

But beyond altruistic reasons, there are financial and productivity concerns that management must consider. Absenteeism, presenteeism (increased number of hours to complete work), staff turnover, and managerial time are all increased. Beyond that, there are additional costs related to healthcare, outside agency investigations (public and private), legal fees, justice system costs, and deadweight (market inefficiency) losses[i]. Eventually, an employer can even develop a reputation for having a toxic workplace, which often drives up the labor costs to attract and maintain people willing to put up with that environment. From an interpersonal, economic, and risk management perspective, organizations should prioritize not only the fostering of a supportive work culture as a preventative step, but also building a culture that properly investigates and addresses traumatic situations that arise.

Traumatized individuals often have trouble discussing a traumatic event, accessing a coherent memory of that event, and calmly relaying a chronological narrative during an interview. Additionally, the employee experiencing trauma may not even realize its impact, causing them to question themselves. Absent major flashbacks, low-level Post-Traumatic Stress can often be misdiagnosed as generalized anxiety or depression. Regardless of if the worker recognizes their own traumatic stress or not, HR and/or corporate investigators must take that possibility into account and interview in a trauma-informed manner. This type of interview gives interviewers the ability to conduct a thorough investigation and avoid compounding possible trauma.

The first step is understanding what happens in the brain during a traumatic event.

The impact of trauma means that our traditional approach of “start at the beginning...” is not going to work. The brain’s function is altered when faced with traumatic situations, and proper question formation needs to reflect that alteration. Rational thought hardly ever overrides instinct and emotion during a traumatic incident, so asking someone to recount that incident in a chronological manner with specific details is just a bad approach. Secondly, with the knowledge of what happens in the traumatized brain, the format of the interview can be structured in such a way as to maximize the opportunity to gain information and minimize any further trauma. Investigators must acknowledge and support an interviewee’s experience and empower that person to tell their story.

To accomplish this goal, investigators must train themselves on how to interact with the traumatized individual because standard interpersonal communication will not work. Finally, HR professionals and LP/AP investigators need to be knowledgeable of the resources available to the employees they interview. No one can accurately predict what any workplace trauma situation may entail, but organizations can prepare resources to be available should such an event occur.

The impact of trauma on an individual is pervasive: it is physical, emotional, spiritual, and economic. Often, trauma is perceived as life-threatening (or livelihood-threatening), even if there was no specifically definable threat involved in the situation. Trauma inhibits a person’s ability to “just calm down and think through” a situation. The personal impact of trauma can be devastating and can affect the greater organization as well. While there is no 100%-effective preventive measure for workplace trauma issues and outside traumas that affect workplace performance, building a corporate culture that can effectively investigate and address these issues, while at the same time supporting the affected individuals, will not only create a better work environment for all employees, but can also shield organizations from many of the liabilities associated with improperly handling difficult situations. Simply put, being good to traumatized employees is good business.

[i] Hussin J. Hejase, “[The Economics of Sexual harassment](#),” Journal of Economics and Economic Education Research, 22:1, (2021), 1-3.