

# Trauma-Informed Evaluation

## *Tip Sheet for Collecting Information*

### Trauma-informed data collection for evaluation

Exposure to trauma is common, yet not everyone that experiences a traumatic event will have a traumatic reaction. Asking about trauma is asking participants to revisit potentially difficult memories from their past. Incorporating a trauma-informed approach to collecting information from clients serves as a universal precaution ensuring you approach sensitive topics carefully.

### *Types of data collection*

Take care to choose the appropriate method for your needs.

- ***Focus groups or facilitated discussions.*** Group conversations can be a great option for open-ended questions about experience in general, but are not recommended for situations in which participants will be asked to speak about their own trauma experiences if they have not already identified themselves as a victim of trauma.
- ***Interviews.*** Trained interviewers can monitor and address participant feelings of distress as the interview progresses. Interviewers can also take the time to build rapport, put the participant at ease, and pause to allow the participant time to process their thoughts and feelings.
- ***Self-administered surveys.*** Surveys allow participants the most privacy for responding to questions that can be particularly sensitive or difficult to speak about with another person. They are less useful when looking for open-ended information and provide little opportunity for detailed information.
- Regardless of the method you choose, **consider environmental and interviewer factors that may remind participants of aspects of their trauma.** For example, women who have experienced domestic violence from a male partner may have difficulty opening up to a male interviewer, no matter how well trained the interviewer is.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration defines trauma as the result of “an **event**, series of events, or set of circumstances that is **experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting **effects** on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”

## *Informed consent*

Informed consent is a *process* that ensures a participant fully understands the research and what is being asked of them prior to consenting. It makes sure participants are choosing to take part in research of their own free will, without undue pressure or coercion.

- **Remind participants that their participation is voluntary.** Especially if they were recruited through a service provider, let them know that their participation will not affect their relationship with any institution nor their ability to access services (they will neither be denied services NOR offered additional services because of their participation).
- Since trauma often includes an inherent loss of control for an individual, putting this control back into the hands of the participant is important. **Provide participants with multiple decision points throughout the survey or interview.** Introducing a new line of questioning with phrases like, “Now I would like to ask you some questions about violence, do you want to continue?” allows participants multiple places to decide how they would like to proceed.
- **Be transparent when describing what they will be asked to do and talk about.** Some distress can stem from the participant not knowing what to expect in an interview. Starting with the introduction, make it clear what types of questions you will ask and that they could cause the participant distress. It may also be helpful to allow the participants to see the interview before they agree to participate.

Traumatic events can take many forms. It can be a one-time incident like an assault or serious accident, a chronic situation like domestic violence or war, or can result from generations of discrimination and maltreatment of a specific culture or people.

## *Instrument development*

Whether participants will be filling out a questionnaire or talking to a trained interviewer, here are some tips for putting together instruments:

- **Take time to build rapport.** Put sensitive questions in the middle or towards the end of the survey.
- **Pay attention to wording.** Words like “rape,” “assault,” “abuse,” and “victim” are emotionally charged. Additionally, not all respondents may identify themselves in those terms.
- **Ask a colleague to review the survey.** Ask someone not involved in the development of the survey to review it for content, spelling, and grammar.

## *Interviewer training*

- **Train interviewers not only on interviewing procedures but also on trauma and trauma responses.** When training interviewers, it is important that interviewers are well-prepared in interviewing and have a good working knowledge of trauma.
- **Ensure interviewers are able to engage with people of different backgrounds in an empathetic, non-judgmental way.** Good interviewers will make people feel at ease which in turn will result in high quality, accurate data. Interviewers also need to be patient, emotionally mature, and able to deal with sensitive issues without these experiences overwhelming the interviewer.
- **Ensure interviewers can navigate role conflict in their position** (for example, allowing for the expression of deep pain without being able to offer counseling or help). The interviewer's job is to remain as neutral as possible while still being empathetic. They are not engaging with participants in a counseling role.
- **Build in time for reflection and debrief for everyone involved in the process.** Interviewers, along with data analysts and medical record extraction specialists can experience secondary trauma with repeated exposure to these difficult topics.

According to Judith Herman, author of *Trauma and Recovery*, psychological trauma is characterized by “feelings of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation”. While not everyone that experiences a traumatic event will have traumatic reactions, such experiences can have profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory.

## *Confidentiality*

Confidentiality is extremely important for all participants, but especially those affected by trauma. For example, some participants may feel uncomfortable signing consent forms or submitting their information with their real name in situations of domestic violence or stalking cases.

- **Do not ask for more identifying information than you absolutely need and destroy any link to participant data and participant names as soon as possible.** Unlike medical records or other personal information, research data is not protected from subpoena in court proceedings.
- Sometimes confidentiality must be violated in the case of mandated reporting procedures. **Make sure you a) have a mandated reporting plan if needed and b) clearly outline and disclose any scenario in which a participant's confidentiality will be violated.**

## *Resources and follow up*

- Because research is not, by its nature, therapeutic, further support resources should be offered in case participants experience distress requiring professional help after the interview. Such resources should be offered to all participants, not just the ones that appear distressed (trauma manifests in many, many ways!).

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