



NATIONAL SEXUAL VIOLENCE RESOURCE CENTER • INFO & STATS FOR JOURNALISTS

TALKING WITH SURVIVORS

Sexual violence is a complex topic, and journalists reporting on it should be aware that it can be different from other crime-related stories. Some survivors might want to talk with the media, while others might not. This is a social justice issue, so there are plenty of story angles and not all of them include interviewing survivors. Regardless of the angle, statistics and background information can add context to stories.

PRIVACY CONCERN

Traditionally, victims' names – regardless of age – are not revealed in order to protect their privacy. According to The Associated Press Stylebook Online (2014), privacy means reporters "do not identify juveniles (under 18) who are accused of crimes, even if other news media do so or police release names. Also, do not transmit images that would reveal their identity. Do not identify, in text or through images, juveniles (under 18) who are witnesses to crimes. Do not identify, in text or through images, persons who say they have been sexually assaulted, and use discretion in naming victims of other extremely severe abuse. ... Sometimes a person may be identified by AP in an abduction or manhunt situation, and it develops later that – because of a sexual assault or other reason – the name should not be used. ... AP may also consider identifying the victim of a sexual assault if the individual comes forward publicly and agrees to be identified."

Media outlets need policies on privacy, and journalists should be mindful of accidentally revealing a survivor's identity through details such as photos, addresses or names of family/relatives.

THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

Survivors of sexual violence have experienced trauma, and each person reacts differently to trauma. Many never talk about what happened to them, or they could wait months or years to talk about it. On the other hand, some survivors will disclose immediately. Be mindful of the resilience, strength and uniqueness of each person's response. The effects of sexual violence and trauma also can impact loved ones, communities, institutions, workplaces and schools. People working closely to this topic can experience secondary trauma.

POTENTIAL TRIGGERS

Certain situations, photos, words, sounds and smells can trigger memories from a survivor's assault, and this can be traumatizing. For example, a survivor could see a photo of the place where they were assaulted, and the photo becomes associated with the events that occurred there. Be mindful not to intentionally trigger victims of sexual violence.

INITIAL CONVERSATIONS

Before you begin reporting, talk with victim advocates and staff at local rape crisis centers to gain insight. Many trained sexual assault counselors/advocates want to talk with reporters, because they know this issue is much more than a crime story. Be proactive and cultivate relationships with experts. Actively maintain these relationships for insight and story ideas throughout the year. Be adaptable. Talking routinely with advocates and service providers could reveal new story angles that are worth exploring.

Some survivors might want to speak with a reporter, while others will not want to be interviewed by the media. If a survivor wants to tell their story, allow them to do so in their own way, in their own words, and in their own time.

Ask how the survivor would like to be identified. Sometimes people want to be fully identified. Sometimes they don't want to be known as a victim, but as a survivor.

It is important to have multiple conversations with survivors and get to know them. Listen and build a rapport with each other. Let the survivor share the amount of information that they are comfortable with sharing. It takes bravery to share these details.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Talk with survivors to determine when and where the interview will take place. Be flexible if they change their minds. Be transparent and answer questions that arise, such as: "When will the interview air/publish?" "Will photos/video be taken?" "How long will coverage last?"

During the interview, journalists can support survivors by having a therapist or a trained sexual assault counselor/advocate present. Reporters can

help survivors feel more comfortable by explaining the interview process. If the survivor wants to do an on-camera interview, introduce him/her to the staff that will be assisting with the recording. Allow the survivor time to meet everyone and get comfortable.

As you're reporting, check in with survivors to update them of changes and inform them when the interview will air/publish. After the interview publishes/airs, follow up with survivors to see how they're doing since the media coverage.

QUESTIONS & LANGUAGE CHOICES

While it is important to provide context for an incident, a reporter needs to be aware that the way a setting or a person's clothing are described can unintentionally assign guilt to the victim. Avoid questioning "why," because this can be viewed as victim-blaming and suggest that the victim somehow provoked the incident. Be mindful of this, because victims of sexual violence are never to blame for what happened to them. Instead, ask open-ended, nonjudgmental questions that allow survivors to share their stories.

Often in news stories, the words are too vague or can imply things that didn't happen. A victim of sexual violence doesn't "perform oral sex." A victim doesn't "kiss" a perpetrator. These phrases suggest that the victim willingly participated.

Be mindful when describing people who sexually abuse. Labeling sex offenders as "monsters" set them apart from the rest of society, and it implies a "them versus us" dynamic. Such labels can hinder people from reporting suspicions they may have about someone, because it challenges their belief that a "good people" wouldn't do bad things. In reality, human beings are complex, and no one is 100% good or 100% bad.