



**Sexual Assault**  
**DEMONSTRATION INITIATIVE**  
Enhancing Sexual Assault Services

# LISTENING TO OUR COMMUNITIES

Tips for Interviewing



This project was supported by Grant No. 2009-TA-AX-K011 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

© The National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project and National Sexual Violence Resource Center 2014.



The content of this publication may be reprinted with the following acknowledgement:

This material was reprinted, with permission, from the National Sexual Violence Resource Center's publication entitled *Listening to our Communities: Tips for Interviewing*. This guide is available by visiting [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)



**Sexual Assault**  
**DEMONSTRATION INITIATIVE**  
Enhancing Sexual Assault Services

# LISTENING TO OUR COMMUNITIES

## Tips for Interviewing

This guide is part of the *National Sexual Assault Demonstration Initiative Toolkit* on community assessment approaches to support the growth of sexual assault services within multi-service programs. It includes a framework for using interviews, balancing interviewing with advocacy, key strategies to consider when focusing on sexual assault issues and information on how to summarize the information gathered. A sample interview guide is also available.

### INTERVIEWS AS STORIES

Qualitative interviewing is based in conversation (Kvale, 1996) and is focused on listening to the people we are interviewing. While doing assessment work is not research, there are some lessons we can learn from researchers about conducting interviews. Qualitative interviews are not so much about gathering facts as they are about gathering stories. They can help you to learn about things we cannot directly see, such as:

- Feelings
- Thoughts
- Intentions
- Prior experiences

- Interpretations
- How people organize their worlds (Patton, 2002).

They allow us to enter, at least a little bit, into another person's world. Consequently, the focus during the interviews should be on actively listening. This is something that advocates and others who work with survivors are very skilled at doing. Although the purpose of the conversation will be different, what it takes to have a successful interview is much the same as what it takes to be supportive of survivors:

- Asking open-ended questions
- Asking questions slowly

---

REMEMBER THAT INTERVIEWS ARE NOT FACT-FINDING MISSIONS.  
THESE ARE CONVERSATIONS WITH A PURPOSE.

---

- Being comfortable with silence and giving the person time to think
- Not assuming you know what the person is talking about
- Asking clarifying questions when you need to
- Respecting when the person does not want to go into more detail
- Letting the person tell you what they want to say

Because you are collecting stories through your assessment, it is important that your organizations ethical practices are followed and that:

- Participation must be voluntary
- Participants must be informed of the nature of the interview
- Confidential of participants is protected.

Remember that interviews are not fact-finding missions. These are conversations with a purpose. As the anthropologist, H. Russell Bernard has written (1995, p. 212), "The rule is: Get an informant on to a topic of interest and get out of the way." You do have a purpose for the interviews and you need to make sure that, in the end, you learn what you need to know. But, how you get there will be shaped by what the other person has to say and their comfort level with sharing. Good interviewing requires letting go of a little control, connecting in a genuine way with the person you are talking with, and listening.

## BALANCING INTERVIEWING AND ADVOCACY



### Interviewing survivors

---

The one challenge to interviewing is that at times the advocate will have to (at least temporarily) set aside their advocacy role. This does not mean that you ignore potential needs for advocacy. Rather, it means that you honor what it is the survivor has chosen to do, which is to be interviewed. Talking in an interview can be a powerful experience for a survivor. It is an opportunity for them to:

- Give voice to their experiences
- Be heard by someone who is non-judgmental
- Make a difference.

## CONSIDERATIONS WHEN INTERVIEWING SURVIVORS

<b>IF THE SURVIVOR</b>	<b>DURING THE INTERVIEW</b>	<b>AT THE END OF THE INTERVIEW</b>
Talks about painful experiences	Listen and acknowledge their feelings.	Let them know that hotline, counseling, and support groups are available.
Tells about poor responses from victim service providers	Listen and acknowledge that the survivor deserved better.	Let them know that advocacy is available if they want to address the experience.
Tells about poor responses from counselors or other professional support providers (not your agency)	Listen and acknowledge that the survivor deserved better.	Let them know that hotline, counseling, and support groups are available. Explain anything about your agency that might help the survivor know they can trust your agency to be supportive and empowering.
Tells about poor responses from your agency's staff	Listen and thank them for telling you about it.	Ask if there is anything they want you to do to follow up on their experience. If appropriate, apologize on behalf of your agency for any hurt that may have been caused.
Becomes distressed by talking about their experiences	Stop the interview and attend to their immediate needs. If appropriate, once calmed ask if they want to continue talking. If they want to continue, remind them that they can stop whenever they want.	Let them know that hotline, counseling and support groups are available. Check in on any physical or emotional safety needs for when they leave the interview. Encourage them to do what they need to take care of themselves.



---

## Interviewing community leaders/members

You may also interview community leaders or community members who hold mistaken and even troubling beliefs about sexual violence. Again, it is important (at least temporarily) to set aside your educator/advocate role. You do not want to shut the interviewee down by jumping in to correct them. However, you also do not want them to leave the conversation thinking that you have agreed with erroneous or problematic information or beliefs. The interview can be an important opportunity to educate others and establish a foundation for respectful and collaborative movement forward.

## CONSIDERATIONS WHEN INTERVIEWING COMMUNITY LEADERS/MEMBERS

IF THE INTERVIEWEE	DURING THE INTERVIEW	AT THE END OF THE INTERVIEW
Expresses misunderstandings about what your agency does	Provide information about the services your agency provides and/or how you go about your work. Ask what they think about that service and/or approach to the work.	Provide them with a brochure or other handout that describes your agency's services and philosophy.
Reinforces myths about sexual violence	Listen to their views. If they presume that most assaults are committed by strangers, you might follow up with, "I appreciate hearing your thoughts. What do you think about assaults committed by someone the survivor knows?"	Acknowledge that sexual violence is a complex issue and that all of us are continually learning more about it. Provide them with info about myths/facts about sexual violence and suggest that they may find the information useful.
Expresses the belief that nothing can be done to change sexual violence	Listen to their views.	Let them know that hotline, counseling, and support groups are available. Talk about work your agency is doing in the community (e.g., prevention, coalitions, etc.). Invite them to get more involved.
Expresses victim blaming attitudes	Listen to their views. If it is useful, ask a follow-up question that asks them to consider the responsibility of the perpetrator and of society (e.g., "Thank you for sharing those thoughts with me. What do you think about any responsibility the perpetrator should bear for the assault?")	Acknowledge that sexual violence can make many people feel vulnerable, either for themselves or for their loved ones. Point out that sometimes it makes us feel safer to think that if we simply do certain things or avoid certain things, we will be safe. State that sexual assault is never the survivor's fault. Provide them resources that include information about sexual assault and its impact on survivors.

---

## Getting more details

People often give short answers initially because they are not sure if what they have to say is relevant to your question or how much detail you want. Your response to that initial answer will determine how deep the interview goes. If you simply move on to the next question, you are sending the message that you want short answers. If you invite more detail, you are sending the message that you are interested in hearing more. There are a variety of ways you can get more details. Some examples of probing techniques are below:

### Silent probes

- Don't be afraid of silence
- Use your body language to show interest

### Uh-huh probes

- "I see..."
- "Can you say more about that..."
- "Yes, what do other people think?"

### Probes for clarity

- "You mentioned \_\_\_\_ and now you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. Can you explain more?"
- "You said \_\_\_\_ which is different from what I heard you say earlier when you talked about \_\_\_\_\_. Why do you think those two situations are different?"
- "Earlier you were talking about \_\_\_\_\_. Can you tell me more about that?"

### Probes for meaning

- "Can you give me some examples of what you mean by \_\_\_\_\_?"
- "What would it look like to do \_\_\_\_\_?"
- "Why is \_\_\_\_\_ important?"

---

## Drawing out 'negative' feedback

It is important that your agency hears not only about what you are doing well, but also about what you could be doing better. However, people are often hesitant to give what may appear to be negative feedback. You can invite that feedback in a variety of ways:

- Be humble. Emphasize from the beginning that your agency thinks you can be doing a better job of serving survivors of sexual assault. Stress the importance of the interviewee's perspectives and how they can see things from a different angle.
- Always ask for more details when there is even a hint of criticism or wishing that your agency was doing something more/different.

If a complimentary comment is made:

- Thank them for the compliment.
- Acknowledge the challenge(s) your agency faces
- Ask for feedback on how to meet that challenge

---

## Focusing on sexual assault

It is often hard for people to talk about sexual assault, even after they say they would like to. For some community leaders and community members, it will be easier to focus their thoughts and comments on domestic violence. This is due to a variety of reasons, including:

- If you are a multiservice agency, you may have had success at getting the community to recognize and be concerned about domestic violence

- 
- Overall there is less awareness and knowledge of what is sexual violence
  - General discomfort with talking about sexual behaviors
  - Lack of familiarity with sexual assault services and what survivors need

If the person you are interviewing begins to lose focus on sexual violence issues, you will need to bring the conversation back to sexual assault. You can do this by:

- Affirming and acknowledging what they said about shelter and/or domestic violence
- Highlighting how sexual assault creates a unique experience or need that is not met through providing shelter
- Asking for their input on that specific experience or need you highlighted

## Summarizing interviews

---

During the interviews you will want to jot down key words and phrases to help you remember later what you heard. The less you write during the interview, the better. You want to keep your focus on listening. You will not need to write down everything that was said. You will not need to recreate what was said word-for-word. You will simply need to recreate the key ideas.

Consider these tips for note taking during the interview:

- Have a blank copy of the interview guide (see Sample Interview Guide) with you. Number the sections (or questions) and when you're taking notes, jot down the number that is being talked about. (It's usually best not to make a copy of the interview guide that has lots of space in between the questions where you can



---

## JOT DOWN KEY WORDS AND PHRASES — TRY TO AVOID WRITING MORE THAN ABOUT FOUR TO FIVE WORDS AT A TIME.

---

write notes. While this may seem like a logical strategy, remember that the conversation might end up with the questions being asked in different orders. If that happens, you will be rifling through multiple pages to find where the pertinent questions are. That will actually be more difficult than taking notes on a separate page.)

- Jot down key words and phrases – try to avoid writing more than about four to five words at a time.
- Use graphic symbols instead of words to help you organize the notes. For example, use arrows to show how different ideas or comments are connected. You can use circles, boxes or other graphics to show how different ideas or comments are grouped together.
- Don't worry about how messy your notes are. As long as you can read them, that is all that matters.

Soon after the interview is over (as soon as convenient, but do not wait more than two days), sit down and write up a summary of what was said. Again, you are trying to convey the key ideas. It is not important to have the summary follow the order in which things were said.

The most useful summaries will probably be those that are organized around themes. Here are some suggestions:

- Write 1–2 paragraphs for each of the sections of the interview.

- Focus on the main ideas of what they talked about.
- Include examples they shared that help explain the issues.
- If there were key phrases the interviewee used or statements they made that you can recreate (or nearly recreate) word-for-word, then put those phrases or comments in italics to show that they are quotes (or near quotes).
- Aim for your summary to be about 2–3 pages single spaced. A little more or less is okay, so long as you have captured with as much detail as possible the main ideas.
- Make sure your summaries are understandable to others. These summaries are your data and are what you will be analyzing to generate the findings from the community assessment. It may help to have a colleague read your summary and ask clarifying questions. If you can, add those clarifying details to your summary.

## REFERENCES

- Bernard, H. R. (1995). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *InterViews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



National Sexual Violence Resource Center • (877)739-3895 • [resources@nsvrc.org](mailto:resources@nsvrc.org) • [www.nsvrc.org/projects/sadi](http://www.nsvrc.org/projects/sadi)  
National Sexual Assault Coalition Resource Sharing Project • (515) 244-7424 • [rsp@iowacasa.org](mailto:rsp@iowacasa.org) • [www.resource-sharingproject.org](http://www.resource-sharingproject.org)