



Responses to Webinar Chat Questions

Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI)

The following questions were submitted by participants in a webinar entitled: *A Paradigm Shift: The Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI)*. The presentation was given by Russell Strand, Chief of the Behavioral Sciences Education and Training Division, US Army Military Police School. The questions were adapted for a more general audience, and EVAWI's Director of Research Dr. Kim Lonsway then co-authored these responses with Mr. Strand. To listen to the recorded presentation, please visit our [webinar archives](#).

Do people have different abilities to recall incidents in different levels of detail? And how does that correlate to stress memories?

Given the complexity and variation involved in every aspect of human behavior, as well as differing experiences and abilities of individuals, the answer to this question has to be “yes” – people do have different abilities to recall incidents in different levels of detail. However, keep in mind that this has as much – if not more – to do with the incident being recalled as it does with the person doing the recalling. In other words, both situational and individual factors will influence a person's ability to recall an event in detail. One of the primary situational factors influencing a person's ability to recall an event is the level of stress and trauma experienced by the person – both during the original event as well as the situation where they are being asked to recall the memory and relay it. Another critical factor is the specific types of memory cues used to help the person remember the important centralized details of the experience.

While the answer to this question could probably fill a thousand pages, the key point for our purpose is that memory is not a straightforward process, and it certainly does not operate like a video camera. Countless factors can influence our memories – both at the point they are being encoded in memory – as well as during the time they are in storage – and even later, while they are being recalled. In fact, each time a memory is recalled it is subject to the influences of new factors before, during, and after subsequent retellings. As a result, there are three primary implications for law enforcement investigators conducting a detailed victim interview.

First, we must recognize that victims will inevitably have memories of the crime that are incomplete, inconsistent, and even confusing or containing factual errors. This is especially likely if we interview them using a traditional police style that focuses on their cognitive recall of peripheral details and which emphasizes the chronological order of events (“who, what, when, where, why”). Keep in mind that traditional law enforcement interview techniques were developed long before some of the groundbreaking neuroscience research was conducted over the past 10-15 years. What we now know is that memory is not simply a matter of experiencing something and then recalling that particular experience in a chronological, narrative manner. Science now assists us in understanding that memory is often fragmented and comprised of images, smells, sounds, feelings, body sensations, behavior, thoughts, and impact. The Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI) technique was specifically designed to enhance experiential memory by incorporating best practices from child forensic interviews, critical incident stress debriefings, and neuroscience research.

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By using the strategies outlined in the FETI, investigators can help prompt victims to remember more details of their traumatic victimization. For example, asking victims open-ended and sensory focused questions can prompt their recall so memories emerge in whatever order and format they have been stored and recalled. With the FETI, Victims are not forced to reconstruct and repackage their memories to fit our idea of what their narrative should sound like – or worse – to fill in the boxes of an agency’s form. As an additional benefit, investigators using this type of approach may find that they are less likely to ask leading questions or to make statements that sound skeptical or judgmental to victims.

Finally, this perspective reminds us to take every possible step to ensure that the interview environment is a safe one for victims to recall their traumatic experiences. More often than not, victims are asked to share an experience that is not only traumatic and difficult to relive through recall, but is also very frightening. In fact, interviewing a victim is a rather intimate act – or at least it should be if it is being done properly. By creating the type of environment that encourages trust, we are also encouraging openness. This is why the first step in effectively interviewing a trauma victim must be the demonstration of sincere empathy, because this is the only way to create genuine trust.

The people who jumped out of the windows of the World Trade Center – were their brains functioning similar to victims of crime? That is to say their amygdala took over?

This is a great question. We were not there on that terrible day, so we are left to speculate on the mental state of those who were. However, it is reasonable to assume that the people trapped in the World Trade Center on September 11th were operating out of a severe trauma state. Similar to the ways described in neuroscience research, it is almost certain that their prefrontal cortex (cognitive functioning) shut down for many people, as their brains reverted to a more primitive response (operating out of the amygdala). This is largely due to the massive release of stress chemicals triggered by such a trauma, which shuts down the more advanced part of the brain and significantly impacts decision-making.

Law enforcement professionals are likely to recognize that emergency personnel responding to such an attack would benefit from a critical incident debriefing, both for their own well-being as well as to gather information about the event. This would be more likely to yield detailed memories than a cognitive-style interview, let alone an interrogation. Our challenge is therefore to apply this recognition to victims of sexual assault as well as emergency personnel. We need to approach victims of sexual assault in the same way as victims of terrorism or any other trauma situation – by interviewing them in a way that recognizes the limitations in their cognitive memory due to the terrible nature of the trauma they experienced.

Would it be true to say that people who tend to be less emotional have more accurate memories?

We are not familiar with any data showing such a correlation. However, there are a number of characteristics people have assumed are related to memory accuracy that have

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been debunked over the years with scientific evidence. For example, one of the most common assumptions people make (including jurors) is that the more *confident* someone is in the accuracy of their memory, the more accurate their memory is likely to be. Another assumption is that the more *detailed* someone's memory is, the more likely it is to be accurate. Yet neither of these assumptions is supported by the data in a straightforward way.

In general, the research consistently shows little or no relationship between confidence levels and the accuracy of memory. While the two can be related, this depends on a number of factors influencing both the confidence of the person and the accuracy of the memory. So the notion that you can predict accuracy based on confidence is not true – but it is something most people want to believe, and in fact people act on this belief every day.

Similarly, it is not a straightforward matter to say that more detailed memories are more likely to be accurate. While there is some evidence that stress and even trauma can heighten certain aspects of memory, it is often for central aspects of the event rather than peripheral details. It is also more likely to focus on sensory details, stored by the more primitive part of the brain, rather than cognitive facts stored by the more advanced frontal lobe we use in everyday life. So, for example, researchers have documented a phenomenon known as the weapon focus effect, often referred to as tunnel vision, where someone who is threatened with a weapon such as a handgun may be able to describe the gun in extreme detail while offering no details about the face of the person holding it. On the other hand, the person in such a situation may not be able to describe any of the details that people (such as police officers) might expect. Based on their trauma response, their memories may actually be fragmented, confusing, and primarily based in the senses.

It is also important to keep in mind that memory accuracy and emotional impact are separate issues and the measurement of each aspect will be different. Despite what we tend to think, the experience of emotion -- or the lack of it -- during a particular event is not necessarily a lead factor in determining how accurate memories of that event might be. On the one hand, we do know that the more emotion or connection people experience during an event, the more they will generally be able to remember about it. However, exactly *what* they remember might not be what we expect. Some parts of the experience may be encoded more strongly and may be easier to retrieve given proper cues to memory.

For example, central details of an event are far more likely to be accurate and easier for people to remember than peripheral details are, without being particularly vulnerable to distortion. Peripheral details are more vulnerable to change and inaccuracies during recall. This is not surprising since people are more likely to pay attention to the central details of an experience and less likely to pay attention to peripheral details. However, interviewers should never make judgments or determinations regarding what *they* believe are central versus peripheral details. It may not be what they think it is, because each person and situation will be different. Rather, this determination should be left up to the person who experienced the event. They are the only ones who can determine and communicate what they paid attention to during a particular experience, regardless of what might seem to others to be central versus peripheral details.

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The bottom line is that a FETI-style interview can help investigators elicit whatever memories the victim is able to recall – whereas a traditional, fact-based interview will often set the victim up for failure and leave both the victim and investigator frustrated.

Are there some people in criminal justice fields who simply should not interview trauma victims?

In any field, there will be some individuals who are better suited for the job than others. When it comes to interviewing sexual assault victims, there is a very limited body of evidence suggesting that law enforcement personnel with specialized training may do a better job, but common sense suggests that the characteristics of the people themselves – particularly their ability to experience and communicate empathy – will be at least as important, if not even more critical. While investigators can always continue to hone their craft, all the training in the world will not help if they do not want to handle sexual assault cases, they do not believe victims are telling the truth, and they blame or judge victims for their behavior.

For example, we are frequently asked whether women are better than men are at interviewing victims of sexual assault. The question is legitimate; because the vast majority of sexual assaults are committed by men, some people fear that the presence of a male officer (especially one that is uniformed and armed) may be upsetting for some victims. On the other hand, some victims have said that they felt safer and calmer in the presence of a male officer and that the male officers were less judgmental than the female officers. Therefore, there is no clear answer regarding whether male or female officers have an automatic advantage in this situation. What is absolutely clear, however, is that an officer's competence and compassion are far more important than their gender in determining their effectiveness at interviewing sexual assault victims. Clearly, both male and female officers can be extremely successful in this domain, and best practice is for law enforcement agencies to provide training for all officers in how to successfully interview sexual assault victims.

Equally important, law enforcement agencies must have rigorous selection procedures to ensure that the people assigned to handle sex crimes: (a) want to do this type of work, (b) are qualified for the job, and (c) receive the support, resources and training they need. If an investigator doesn't like working sexual assault cases, there is little or no chance he or she will be good at investigating them. These investigators will inevitably communicate their attitude to victims, and this will undermine their ability to conduct a successful interview and investigation. Simply put, they will not be motivated to take the steps that are required to do this job well. Yet for those individuals who do want to work these cases, agencies have an equal responsibility to ensure that they are qualified to do so and they receive the support they need. This will require ensuring that they regularly receive specialized training and supervision.

One strategy that many child forensic interview protocols train is for interviewers to say, "tell me everything you remember, from the beginning to the middle to the end." Is there a potential risk/problem with asking such a structured sequencing question?

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There are three aspects of risk involved with asking the question in this way. First, the victim's memory is generally not stored in chronological order, so telling the narrative in this way will require the victim to reconstruct his/her memory and repackage it from the way it has actually been stored. This makes the task far more difficult for victims, and it also means they will inevitably fail to recall some details that could be critically important – or they might recall those details but edit them out of their narrative, because they don't fit the expectation for what they think you want as an interviewer. In other words, the first risk is that the interview will yield fewer accurate details than a FETI-style interview with more open-ended prompts.

The second risk is that victims may “fill in” the details that are missing from their memory, as they put the puzzle pieces together in the way you have asked with this type of question. This process may be a conscious one, or it may not be, but the reality is that memory recall is always a reconstructive act. The way we recall a memory is powerfully influenced both by the prompts that are used as well as the expectations we have for what we think the listener wants to hear. If the memories we have do not fit together in the way we believe they should, our brains are hard-wired to fill in the gaps with information that could be true – or we believe should be true – in order to make sense. A FETI-style interview is designed to reduce these expectations and free victims to recall their memories in a way that is consistent with how they are stored.

The third element of risk is closely intertwined with the other two. That is, by asking victims to recall their memories in chronological order, we are often setting them up to fail. In pragmatic terms, this means we invoke the two risks already discussed: that the victim's statement will be missing details that could have otherwise been documented and may include factual errors that were introduced while the victim tried to make sense of the memory and fill in the gaps. More important, however, is the moral concern that victims should never be made to feel like a failure or set up to make “forced errors” that will only fuel the devastation and self-blame they are likely already experiencing.

Given that so few sexual assaults are reported, and so few victims who do report remain engaged with the process, it is reasonable to ask ourselves what we are doing as professionals to contribute to this problem – and what steps we are taking to truly change the system and create a different reality.

This type of interviewing asks victims to be “in the moment” of their victimization – requiring them to relive a terrible and traumatic experience. It's powerful, but it's also an awesome responsibility. If we take someone there, how can we make sure we can bring them back safely? What strategies can we use to help “re-ground” them into the present?

This is an excellent – and critically important – question. As we have said, it is a very intimate act to share someone's “trauma bubble” and a tremendous responsibility to ask them to relive their victimization in the way that a FETI-style interview inevitably does. There are therefore several strategies you can use to help them to return safely and re-engage with current reality.

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First and foremost, you must make sure victims have adequate support before, during, and after the interview. We will discuss some strategies you can use as an investigator to help victims re-ground themselves, so that victims are not simply cut loose from the interview, and sent back into the world without adequate support.

Incorporate Victim Advocates: One critical form of support is available from victim advocates. Make sure victims are offered the services of a victim advocate – as soon as possible and as often as needed throughout the process of the investigation and prosecution. We know that some law enforcement agencies resist the involvement of victim advocates, and exclude them from interviews with victims, but we believe this is a serious mistake.

When victims enter the criminal justice system, they are asked to turn their lives upside down – precisely at the point where they are least able to tolerate such disruption – while they are struggling to recover from the trauma of victimization and its devastating aftermath. Is it any wonder, then, that so few victims decide to become engaged with the criminal justice system – and so many who do report end up withdrawing when the process takes off like a freight train running through their lives?

To stay engaged with the criminal justice process, victims need virtual mountains of information, support, and ongoing assistance. For many victims, this is best provided by an advocate. Advocates can also provide assistance to connect victims with other resources and referrals, and they can continue to offer follow-up services as they work their way through the criminal justice process. We should therefore take every step we can to ensure that victims are offered the services of a victim advocate – but also provided with an entire response system that facilitates and encourages the involvement of an advocate whenever possible.

Include Support People: Another strategy is to help victims marshal their own support system of friends, family members, and other loved ones. Community professionals can help by incorporating support people into the response system whenever it is appropriate. Of course, many victims do not want a friend or family member present during their interview with law enforcement, because they do not want their loved ones hearing their description of the assault (and the uncomfortable details that will inevitably emerge). This is why many victims prefer to have a professional advocate present during the interview, because the advocate is not a part of their personal life.

However, some victims do want to have a family member or friend present during the interview, and we believe this request should be accommodated whenever possible. In fact, we believe that the decision regarding who will be present during the interview should generally be left to the victim. As long as the support person is not also a witness, disruptive and does not actively participate in the interview process, the benefit for the victim is usually well worth the presence of an additional person. By offering victims the support they want, we can help them to stay engaged in the criminal justice process – and also to participate more successfully. Of course, this can also be good for their recovery and well-being as well.

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We offer this recommendation as a general rule for victim interviews, but given the sensitive nature of the FETI, we believe it may be even more critical in this context. Investigators should therefore work to ensure that victims being interviewed using the FETI have the support person they want in the room with them. Investigators can also work with advocates to make sure that support people are given basic guidelines on how to effectively provide support for victims. Support people can even be referred to many of the same services that are available to victims such as a 24-hour hotline, counseling, and referrals.

Provide Time and Space: Now that we have addressed the issue of support, it is time to turn to suggestions you can use while you are still in the room with the victim. The first step in that process is recognizing that that you have asked victims to return with you to a very difficult place and that they need support to come back safely to the present.

Next, make sure to provide victims with the time they need to re-orient themselves back to the present, and offer a safe and comfortable place in which to do this. Many communities have worked to create this type of interview room for child victims; we are now recognizing that the same need exists for adolescents and adults. The room can be decorated in warm colors, with comfortable furniture, artwork, and other design aspects that create a sense of welcome and safety. Basic comforts and amenities can also be provided, such as tissues, beverages, and snacks. The room can be used for victims to connect with advocates and support people before the interview, and they can remain in the room after the interview is concluded, until they feel able to leave and return to their lives.

Use Simple Grounding Techniques: It can also be helpful for investigators to familiarize themselves with simple grounding techniques to assist victims during the interview or to help re-orient victims to the present after conducting a FETI-style interview. An example of how to use grounding techniques is available from [Psychology Today](#). Victims can be guided to use the simple exercises described in this article to relax, breathe, and engage with each one of their five senses – one at a time. While this type of grounding technique may be used by advocates when they are present during the interview, it is not counseling or therapy, so the process can be used by investigators to bring victims back to the present and to help slow their breathing and heart rate. Victims can even be taught to use these techniques on their own, when they begin to feel overwhelmed and need to re-ground themselves into the present.

Make a Plan for Self-Care: As the interview wraps up, and the victim begins to reorient toward the present, it can also be helpful to guide them to think about the steps they will take for self-care. To start, you can ask victims about what will happen when they leave the interview. Are they going back to school or work? Will they immediately return to caring for young children? After guiding them to visualize what will happen next in their life, you can then ask if there are steps that can be taken to help them with “re-entry.” Do they need you to call their employer or school to make arrangements, or to offer a reason for missing school or work? Can they be given some time off, or offered some other accommodation? As one example, law enforcement can offer to write a letter simply stating that the victim is a witness in a crime.

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The appropriate response will be different for each victim, but the process will help them to think ahead and prepare for the difficult transition that awaits as they return to their regular lives. As a final step in this process, you can ask victims what they do to take care of themselves. What gives them comfort, or makes them feel better when they are distressed? After finding something that is healthy and not self-destructive (such as drug or alcohol abuse), victims can be encouraged to make a specific plan to do it later in the day – or as soon as possible. Again, this helps victims to reorient to the present, and plan for the future, with the recognition that this will be difficult but they have tools to use and people who can help.

Provide Contact Information: Finally, make sure you leave victims with contact information to reach you, and someone who might be available to assist them if you are not available for an extended period of time (e.g., a planned vacation). While it is often routine practice for detectives to leave a business card, it can be helpful to jot down any notes regarding how and when they can be reached. For example, it is important for victims to understand the difference between calling in an emergency versus contacting a detective who doesn't work 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Detectives can make a note on their business card regarding what times/days they are generally available. This can be provided along with other written materials that summarize their rights as a crime victim and referral information for any community resources.