The following questions were submitted by participants in the 2-part webinar series entitled Forensic Experiential Trauma Interviewing: A Trauma Informed Experience, by Russell W. Strand. The questions were adapted by EVAWI for a more general audience, and responses were written by Mr. Strand with some additional comments by EVAWI staff.

**FETI Methodology**

*Do you advocate conducting an initial interview to start the investigation and then doing a more detailed, follow-up interview 24-72 hours later?*

What we now know about trauma is that it may take some time for memories of the traumatic event to consolidate and form. So yes, I believe the initial interview should simply address the information necessary to get the investigation started, and then the victim should be allowed at least one or two sleep cycles before conducting a detailed, follow-up interview.

Some aspects of the FETI are appropriate for use with a traumatized victim during an initial interview. Demonstrating genuine empathy, asking what the person is able to remember, and then using “tell me more” prompts will help the investigator understand some of the most important aspects of the incident, such as location, elements of the crime, and the identity of any other person(s) involved. Then the question, “What if anything can’t you forget?” will enhance your understanding of some of the initial facts. However, don’t push for information beyond what the victim is able to provide at the moment. After you have what you need, or whatever the victim is able to share at the time, you can set up an appointment for a later time (perhaps 24 to 48 hours later) for a follow-up and more in-depth interview.

Additional response by EVAWI:

The recommendation to allow victims 1-2 full sleep cycles before conducting an in-depth interview originally came from the work of Lt. Colonel David Grossman and PPCT Management Systems, Inc. (1989). It was originally intended for interviews conducted with officers following a critical incident such as a shooting. However, the recommendation has since been supported with neuroscience research. This point was made by Dr. Jim Hopper, in his responses to questions submitted during another 2-part webinar series for EVAWI:

> Two full sleep cycles may be necessary for the episodic memory circuitry to consolidate (that is, store into a retrievable state) information that was encoded at the time of a sexual assault (or other trauma). Researchers have found that processes occurring during both rapid eye movement (REM) and non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep play critical roles in the consolidation of memories.

The full text of Dr. Hopper’s responses can be found in our [webinar archive](#).
How do we respond if the victim experiences a “trigger” during the FETI process and becomes dysregulated during this sensory-based interview?

Any professional working with victims and witnesses should always be concerned about potential triggers and adverse responses. Whether traditional interview techniques or more trauma-informed approaches such as FETI are used, victims who are being interviewed by investigators or prosecutors are often overwhelmed. There is a great deal of research documenting the adverse impact of traditional criminal justice approaches on sexual assault victims. Many sexual assault victims have described being treated poorly and feeling as if they were the focus of the investigation rather than the suspect. Unfortunately, there is also a significant body of research that indicates that their perceptions are often accurate.

The FETI process is specifically designed to be as sensitive to the needs of the victim as possible and to be attentive to any reactions they are experiencing. Although some of the sensory questions may be difficult for some victims to answer, many victims, including highly traumatized victims, have said that the FETI experience was actually a cathartic experience.

Regardless of the interview process used, all criminal justice professionals should know how and when a victim may need a referral to a mental health professional. Victims should also have access to an advocate at every phase of the criminal justice process. Law enforcement should have policies and procedures in place to react to and provide support to anyone, including victims, witnesses, and suspects who may need emotional or psychological support.

Additional response by EVAWI:

Failures in the criminal justice response to sexual assault have been seen across the country, as documented by journalists (Dissell, 2009; Krakauer, 2015; Stevick & Hefley, 2011; Walters, 2012) and non-profit advocacy organizations (Amnesty International, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2009, 2010, 2013), as well as the U.S. Department of Justice, where Civil Rights Division Attorneys have led investigations to improve practices in communities as diverse as New Orleans, Louisiana and Missoula, Montana.¹ These failures have also been examined in reviews of police practice (Police Executive Research Forum, 2012; Women’s Law Project, 2013), and discussed in Congressional hearings (Senate Judiciary Committee, 2010). Increasingly, these failures are sparking litigation by sexual assault victims who contend that they constitute a form of institutional bias.² For reviews of the social scientific literature regarding “secondary victimization” by responding professionals, please see sources such as:

¹ For more information, please see the website for the Special Litigation Section of the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, at: http://www.justice.gov/crt/conduct-law-enforcement-agencies.
² See, for example, the case of Heather Marlowe vs. the City and County of San Francisco, which was filed on January 6, 2016 in the United States District Court of Northern District of California. In that case, the plaintiff argues that the systematic failures of the San Francisco Police Department to properly investigate sexual assault reports and test forensic evidence constituted a violation of her civil rights and thus denied her equal protection under the law.
How do you react when a victim starts blaming themselves during an interview?

I recommend focusing questions on their statements that they are to blame. For example, if the victim states that they are to blame for the rape, I would encourage them to describe their feelings by saying, “Tell me more about this being your fault?” This will give you some insights into the way they are feeling at that moment, and their response may help you to better understand the victim’s behaviors and decision-making before, during, and after the assault.

If the victim becomes overwhelmed during the interview, is it ok to suggest taking a break or will that cause problems with their memory and recall?

It is a very compassionate approach to be aware of the victim’s emotional state and potential needs. The difficult part is determining whether the victim is truly overwhelmed or simply working through some aspect of the traumatic experience. Victims should always be advised that they can take a break at any time, for any reason, including if they feel overwhelmed.

However, the more difficult question is whether an advocate should be proactive if they feel the victim is experiencing distress. The risk is this: If a break is taken prematurely, it may send a message to the victim that the investigator or advocate is uncomfortable with the information and need a break before continuing with a difficult subject. This may shut the victim down and potentially inhibit or interfere with the processing of a particular memory.

I believe it is generally best to leave the timing of a break up to the victim, who should be feeling in control of the interview and interview process. Of course, there may be times to take a break based on your own observations, but exercise caution with this.

To illustrate, one of the most traumatized victims I had the honor of working with was extremely distraught, to the point of crying uncontrollably at one point during the interview. I provided her space to continue without interruption, and at the end of the interview, she...
thanked me for not stopping the interview when she was so upset, because she wanted to work through it. She also said she remembered more as a result of working through the feelings and trauma of her experience.

*Are there any caveats or exceptions to the recommendation that you begin an interview by expressing genuine empathy? For example, what if we come across a victim with a personality disorder, where an expression of empathy might be counterproductive?*

Everyone should begin an interview by demonstrating genuine empathy, regardless of a person’s diagnosis, behavior, or perceived mental health. One of the key skills a FETI practitioner should employ is to remain flexible and “feel” your way through an interview. In other words, the interviewer should be prepared to go wherever the victim does – to be where the victim is – to understand the victim’s reactions to specific interactions.

Sensitivity to the victims’ needs is essential. If you sense that your demeanor or questions are having a negative impact on the victim, explore this possibility. Ask about the victim’s concerns, feelings or reactions to the manner in which your interview is being conducted. It’s important to not jump to conclusions, because the impact of trauma can be very complex and even confusing. For example, some people may feel uncomfortable when they are treated nicely or empathetically. It may even make them suspicious of your motive. Be sensitive and flexible. You should never make assumptions based on your own preconceived ideas about someone’s life experiences.

A related concern is that some people don’t like to share emotional feelings and in fact, they feel uncomfortable doing so. This is often particularly true for boys and men who are often socialized to avoid most emotions other than anger. Focusing on their emotional feelings may inhibit your understanding of their experience. For these individuals, you may want to begin your interview with questions focused on their thoughts and physical sensations, rather than emotions. Then as the person becomes more comfortable sharing experiential information, they may offer information about their emotional experiences – but don’t push it. Encourage them to go at their own pace.

*You said to focus less on emotion with men. What can you tell us about that?*

This question relates directly to the last one. As noted above, men are often gender socialized to avoid most feelings other than anger. Other emotions such as sadness, fear, and emotional pain leave many men feeling vulnerable. In fact, many men have contempt for these types of feelings and avoid them. Therefore, when they are specifically asked about some of these feelings, some men will shut down, become overwhelmed, or even become angry.

Trauma informed investigators must be sensitive to this possibility and avoid exploring emotional feelings, at least initially, with people who may have this type of reaction. It may be more common among men, but this type of reaction will certainly be seen with some women as well. With these individuals, it is often best to focus on physical feelings, body positions, and thoughts. It is also helpful to explore sights, sounds, tastes, and other tactile experiences. As the interview progresses and trust is gained, the interviewer can explore the possibility that the
person is ready and able to discuss some of the emotional feelings and thoughts involved in the experience.

What is your thought about engaging an individual in a FETI interview, and then presenting or repeating the information they shared in a chronological narrative format?

I do not recommend this. You don’t want to change the victims’ perspective about any aspect of their experience or introduce information that doesn’t coincide with their independent memory. This is one of the ways that false memories can possibly be created for victims. Every effort should be made to obtain and document the victim’s experience in the most natural manner possible, in keeping with the principles of neuroscience and trauma memory.

Some individuals who have experienced trauma are able to remember some sequential information so they can consolidate their memories into a coherent narrative. However, others are not. The ability to disclose sequence and narrative is unique to every individual. Patience and understanding are essential to avoid creating false or potentially contradictory information.

Application of FETI

Is it appropriate to use FETI during an initial interview with a victim? Or is it only designed to be used during the detailed follow-up interview(s)?

I encourage first responders to use some of the FETI principles for initial interviews with anyone who has experienced a highly stressful or traumatic experience. This includes: demonstrating genuine empathy, asking what the individual is able to remember about their experience, and using appropriate open-ended prompts such as “tell me more.”

First responders should begin an initial interview by doing everything they can to ensure that the victim feels safe, in control and cared for. Then asking what the victim is able to remember about the experience is a great way to engage in a conversation that begins eliciting information. First responders may need to explore specific details during the initial interview, for the SANE/SAFE exam, the initial police report, or other preliminary responses. This can be enhanced with prompts like, “Tell me more…” Then, if the victim is struggling to remember any or most of the details, it can be helpful to ask: “What if anything can’t you forget?”

On the other hand, some strategies may not be appropriate for an initial interview and should be reserved for the detailed follow-up interview. This includes an exploration of sights, sounds, smells, and thoughts, as well as asking about the most difficult part of the experience. Caution should be exercised by first responders to ensure they don’t overstep their role as dictated by their agency or go too far into the depth of the victim’s experience during an initial interview if they are not responsible for the follow-on investigation.

How do you balance the need to know immediate information for safety reasons (like a subject with a gun for instance) with trauma informed interviewing?
We have found that even in exigent circumstances (such as a hostage situation, ongoing domestic dispute or even an active shooter scenario), victims and witnesses can benefit from a trauma-informed approach. This includes Communications personnel such as 911 operators and call takers.

For example, there was a situation where a wife was taken hostage by her husband, and she subsequently escaped. The husband remained in the house, threatening to hurt himself and others. Following her escape, first responders used traditional interview techniques to try to obtain information about the status and location of the husband and potential weapons involved. The wife was extremely distraught, and the more she was peppered with questions, the more upset she became. One of the first responders escorted the woman to a more comfortable location, used calming techniques, and then conducted a FETI interview. Within a few minutes, the distraught wife was able to share significant information that allowed SWAT to take custody of the husband with no injuries to himself or anyone else.

The bottom line is this: People remember better when they feel safe and as relaxed as possible given the nature of the situation. This should therefore be our first objective when working with someone in a stressful or traumatic situation. If we don’t recognize this, we are not helping the victim to disclose information nor are we accomplishing what we need to during the initial response or follow-up investigation.

In other words, trauma-informed approaches should always be attempted, regardless of the urgency of the situation. To do otherwise may actually compromise the collection of necessary information and possibly the well-being of not only the victim, but first responders who will be better equipped to handle a dangerous situation if they have as much information as possible when dispatched.

Is FETI a good tool for interviewing children as well as adults?

I believe FETI is an excellent approach for interviewing any victim or witness of a traumatic or highly stressful experience, and this includes both adults and adolescents, as well as younger children (i.e., under the age of 12). FETI has yielded some amazing results with children, but research and collaboration with child forensic interview professionals is needed before offering a wholesale recommendation for this practice. I believe child forensic interviewers must follow policy guidance and interview protocols of their respective agency and great caution in terms of deviation should be used when interviewing children under six years of age.

How, if at all, does FETI change when the assault was drug or alcohol facilitated?

The short answer is no, I don't recommend any deviation from the FETI process when you are interviewing someone who was under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol at the time of the experience. In fact, the effects of alcohol on the brain are similar in many ways to the impact of traumatic stress. As with traumatic stress, alcohol (ethanol) impairs portions of the brain, and the impairment becomes more severe as the blood alcohol rate increases.
The focus of the FETI process is to collect as much sensory information as the person can remember about their experience. The portion of the brain that consistently collects, stores, and recalls sensory memory is sometimes less impacted by stress chemicals and/or alcohol than other more advanced portions of the brain such as the prefrontal cortex. I believe the FETI approach can be helpful with anyone who has been impaired due to stress, trauma, and even drugs and/or alcohol.

I would caution against the use of any in-depth interview process while the individual is currently under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The best practice for interviewing acutely intoxicated victims is to use an empathetic approach. Don’t expect or push for too much detail while an individual is intoxicated and do not ask leading questions. Questions that need to be asked immediately, perhaps to determine safety or establish a crime scene, should be short and simple. However, documentation of behaviors and whether an individual is able to speak coherently, along with other objective symptoms and evidence demonstrating intoxication is extremely important.

**How does FETI change when interviewing suspects, if at all?**

Our experience has been that the use of FETI with victims, witnesses, and suspects has been very beneficial for criminal justice practitioners. The methodology does not change.

One of the goals of a traditional suspect interview is to encourage the suspect to confess or at least make admissions. Unfortunately, typically the suspect’s goal is to not confess or provide information that may be used against them. When FETI is applied in a suspect interview, the suspect generally provides a lot more information without realizing how the information might be used (e.g., selection method, psychosexual and psychosocial needs met by committing the act, their own sensory experience, intent, and victim responses to fear). This is accomplished through genuine empathy and a desire to truly understand the experience of the suspect before, during, and after the act. It’s also to important that because FETI will solicit more information which allows the investigator to conduct a thorough investigation that may help to exclude suspects when appropriate.

**Can the FETI be used with defendants post-conviction, as a part of their community supervision?**

Understanding a person’s experience is always beneficial. The use of FETI with offenders who are being managed post-conviction is an innovative idea, but I believe it will yield more usable information than traditional interview approaches. Trust between the offender and supervisor may also increase as the offender is able to share more about the experiential nature of their offending. Lack of experiential information on the part of the offender may also be an indicator that the offender is not willing or able to cooperate.
Trauma Informed Approaches

*Could we have the list of what trauma informed is and is not?*

Of course! Here you go…

Trauma informed *is not*:

- Simply being nice
- Just asking non-leading and open-ended questions
- Addressing only physical safety concerns
- Focusing primarily on who, what, where, why, when, and how
- Requiring a sequential narrative from the victim right away
- Expecting the victim to accurately remember peripheral details of the experience
- Requiring the victim to make a full and complete statement before they are ready or able to do so
- Maintaining control of the interview by investigators

Trauma Informed *is*:

- Demonstrating genuine empathy
- Ensuring that the interview location is comfortable and convenient for the victim, and safe physically and emotionally.
- Facilitating disclosure of the experience
- Encouraging and allowing the victim to do most of the talking
- Allowing time and space for the victim to process the experience
- Providing the victim as much control over and during the interview as possible
- Conducting progressive interviews when appropriate
- Having a working knowledge of trauma and trauma related memory
- Understanding the impact of trauma including freeze, flee, fight, tonic immobility, collapsed immobility, mental defeat, dissociation, and other normal reactions to trauma
- Focusing on sensory memories
- Concentrating on central details
- Understanding the context of the experience, before, during, and after the assault
- Avoiding asking “why” questions
- Avoiding questions specifically focused on peripheral information
Is it possible to get professionals to care about trauma-informed approaches, not just because they yield more information but also because they care about victims and their experiences?

It is possible, but person-specific. Some people are naturally caring and empathetic, and others can learn to be caring and empathetic. Unfortunately, there are some professionals who are either incapable or unwilling to care about victims and their experiences. This type of work is not for everyone, but there is reason to hope. I have found that educating professionals on common victim responses, neuroscience, trauma, and traumatic memory can and often does assist some people who I never thought would understand. Education is a powerful thing!

The Question of Bias

I work at a university with some investigators who believe that being trauma-informed (i.e. meeting the victim where they feel safe, being empathetic, etc.) will demonstrate bias in favor of the victim and make the agency susceptible to a lawsuit by the perpetrator. How would you respond to those individuals?

Law enforcement should treat anyone they meet with dignity and respect and ensure their physical and emotional safety. This includes suspects. Good law enforcement interviewers often bend over backwards to make sure that suspects feel safe and welcome.

Treating someone as a human being is not biased. Bias is when people are treated differently on the basis of specific, identifiable characteristics.

Additional response by EVAWI:

Some have questioned whether a “victim-centered” orientation compromises the ability of police and prosecutors to remain objective, potentially opening them up to attacks by defense counsel and/or losing cases at trial. These questions are raised with interview approaches such as FETI, as well as other aspects of a victim-centered investigation or prosecution, and initiatives such as our Start by Believing awareness campaign. The same question has even been asked whether a police officer should say to a victim, “I'm sorry this happened to you.”

These are legitimate questions, stemming from our shared concern that sexual assault cases must be investigated and prosecuted based on the evidence. It is therefore critical to emphasize that a victim-centered philosophy is not to “railroad” suspects, by encouraging preordained conclusions, or investigations conducted only to confirm an initial hypothesis. Confirmation bias is a real phenomenon, where human beings – including criminal justice professionals – tend to seek evidence that confirms pre-existing ideas and avoids or discredits evidence challenging these ideas. (For a concise description of what confirmation bias is and how it operates, please see this helpful YouTube video: https://youtu.be/B_YkdMwEO5U.)

Yet the reality is this: When it comes to sexual assault, confirmation bias has long influenced the response of criminal justice professionals in the opposite direction. This is often described
as “implicit bias,” and ample evidence suggests that it affects the investigation and prosecution of crime just as it influences responses by the public. In fact, the profound impact of implicit bias was highlighted in groundbreaking new guidance published by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) in 2015 entitled, *Identifying and Preventing Gender Bias in Law Enforcement Response to Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence*. This new DOJ guidance clearly calls on law enforcement agencies to eliminate any such bias in their policies and practices.

For more information on this topic, we have written a Training Bulletin addressing the question of bias in criminal justice responses to sexual assault, particularly with respect to our *Start by Believing* campaign. This Training Bulletin is available in our Resource Library.

**Concerns about False Information**

*As the brain remembers more, how do we know it isn’t false memories? How can we tell the difference between added correct and added false memories?*

The bottom line is this: Absent specific factual information to the contrary, no one can tell the difference between true and false memories. That is why it is so critical to avoid creating false memories with leading questions or other inappropriate interview techniques.

Remembering an experience is a process, not an event. Memory is complex; it is not as simple as the “file cabinet” or “video recorder” i.e. linear or sequential files analogy that many have been taught to believe in. One of the basic principles of the FETI is therefore to preserve the memories of an experience in their purest form. This is why practitioners should use non-leading and non-suggestive cues. This is also why interviewers should focus primarily on sensory and central details, which are generally more strongly encoded, instead of weakly encoded or non-encoded peripheral details which are often the focus of a traditional law enforcement interview.

By using these techniques, interviewers can be more confident that they are not introducing false information, forcing confabulation or increasing the risk of false memories.

*What do you do if you start disbelieving a sexual assault victim? For example, after 4 interviews and information-gathering, if doubts are starting to work their way into the mind of the investigation?*

Doubts are important signs that the interview needs additional information. As mentioned in the webinar, law enforcement should develop at least three hypotheses to consider during a complete and unbiased investigation:

1. It happened the way the victim said it happened.
2. It didn’t happen the way the victim described.
3. Something happened, but in a different way, which may or may not meet the elements of a criminal offense.
After a thorough investigation has been conducted, law enforcement then considers all of the information and evidence to determine which of the three hypotheses is the most likely.

Remember, that the goal of an investigation is not to prove or disprove that a victim or suspect is lying, per se. Rather, the goal is to collect as much experiential information as possible and then look at that information (as well as the totality of the investigation and evidence) to determine which of these three hypotheses best fits with the evidence and information obtained..

If you begin to doubt what the victim (or anyone else) is telling you, gently explore the inconsistencies in a non-offensive manner. You can do this by continuing to use the FETI methodology and something we call the “FETI funnel.” For example, the victim might have said that she and the suspect were in a hotel room for over an hour, but the security camera footage might show that the victim was in the room for only 20 minutes. A FETI interviewer should probe this inconsistency using a prompt such as, “Tell me more about being in the room for over an hour?” Then allow the victim time to think about the question and respond. Once the victim responds, continue to ask open-ended, non-leading, questions such as “Tell me more about…” It may also be helpful to focus on sensory-based questions, because this can help the victim to remember context and other experiential details. It can also help the investigator to understand that experience and the context. However, it is always important to remember that the ability to perceive or comprehend time is often impaired during high stress and trauma.

There are many reasons why there might be real or perceived inconsistencies in a victim’s statement. For example, they can result from false information being provided by the victim, either intentionally or unintentionally. The victim could be confused or not understand what is being asked. Of course, inconsistencies can also result from the different perspectives of a victim and interviewer, which affect the interpretation of what a victim’s statement means, as well as inaccurate documentation by the interviewer or other responding professionals.

Some of these inconsistencies may still exist even after a thorough interview or investigation has been concluded. Due to the traumatic nature of the experience, and the impact on the victim’s memory and recall, there may be details, gaps, or inconsistencies that simply “don’t make sense.” They may not make sense to the victim either, and they may never be understood or explained. For example, just about every investigator has had a case where they expected to find latent prints or DNA in a certain location but no such evidence was located. Or a case where evidence is found in a certain location that cannot be explained.

Remember, some elements of a traumatic experience are poorly encoded or not encoded at all. This is the nature of trauma. This means that inconsistencies or gaps may not mean the victim is being untruthful.

However, if you have conducted a FETI interview, and you believe that the victim is being intentionally deceptive and/or you have specific information that directly contradicts the victim’s account of the experience, I recommend addressing these concerns directly with the victim. Even then, you should continue to demonstrate genuine empathy and re-frame confrontational
questions into FETI-type questions, so victims don’t feel like they are now a suspect under interrogation. Or, if the victim does become a suspect in a criminal offense for some reason, the victim should be informed of that fact before continuing the interview.

Overcoming Challenges

You mentioned that we all know "that colleague or person" who we wouldn't want to interview our family or friends if they were victimized by crime, because of their technique or approach to victims. What is your advice on how to confront that type of person, to address their ineffective or insensitive techniques?

First and foremost, before you confront anyone, it is always best if you have already established a level of trust with them. Your approach should be creative and flexible and must be individualized to that person. Critical and sometimes difficult conversations are an important part of every profession. However, they can be very concerning to those on the receiving end.

A great way to start might be to explore how they feel about the work they do: What, if any, concerns do they have about their work? How do they feel about working with victims? How do they interact with victims? How do they think victims react to them or how do they think a victim feels about their experience working together?

Another recommendation is to conduct a FETI-style interview with the person you are having a problem with (including behaviorally based questions). For example, you can open the conversation by discussing a particular case or asking about their experience working specific types of cases or working with certain types of victims. You may ask, “How do you feel about…?” or “What are your thoughts about…?” Then as they begin to discuss the issues, you can prompt them to share more about their experiences by asking them to, “Tell me more about…?” This may be very helpful and provide you with additional insights which will allow you to understand where they might be coming from and help identify how you can best provide them with resources to improve their response.

Role of Advocates

Could you share what you think is the most helpful way(s) for an advocate to help prepare a victim to be interviewed by the police?

One of the primary objectives of a victim advocate is to understand the needs of a victim and then provide support and information that will assist them. This can include accompanying and supporting victims through the process of reporting, investigation, and prosecution if they choose. Advocates can explore any questions or concerns the victim may have, and identify any barriers to reporting or participating in the interview process.

Before working with any individual victim, however, advocates should seek to build relationships with the police departments they routinely work with, to understand their interviewing practices and protocols. One of the best ways to do this is to coordinate joint
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interview training and participate on any multidisciplinary policy review panels or committees that a community SARRT may be engaged in.

Additional response by EVAWI:

In our OnLine Training Institute (OLTI), we offer a module on *Effective Victim Advocacy within the Criminal Justice System*. It provides detailed guidance on the role of community-based and system-based victim advocates, specifically for work that intersects with the criminal justice system. It is a more in-depth version of another module, entitled, *Breaking Barriers: The Role of Community-Based and System Based Victim Advocates*. The longer course is recommended for victim advocates, and the shorter one is designed for allied professionals, but anyone can do either one. The material covered in the two modules is essentially the same, just at a different level of detail, so we suggest completing one or the other but not both.

All OLTI training modules are available in print format our [Resource Library](#). However, the online version in the actual OLTI offers additional opportunities that the print version does not, including review exercises, practical applications, and end-of-course test questions. After successfully completing an OLTI module, participants can download a personalized certificate of completion. For more information and to access the OLTI, please visit our [website](#).

*I am a victim advocate, and I've got a great relationship with our sexual assault detective. How can I prepare my clients for a FETI interview in a way that won't negatively affect the interview? Is it okay if they are told that the detective will be asking them to describe their sensations or their feelings, or do you think that might prime them and taint their statement? I know that the more information a client has going into an interview, the more in control they'll feel, but I don't want to jeopardize the investigation in any way.*

Your sensitivity to this issue is both admirable and necessary. We must be very careful about setting expectations for anyone, especially someone who is undergoing significant stress or trauma. The best thing to do is to address their questions or concerns as best you can, and sometimes the best answer is: “I’m not sure, let’s address that with the detective if you would like.”

Every victim advocate is different and the same goes for police officers, detectives, and agents. You can certainly provide victims with an overview of the FETI process in general terms, but specific questions and concerns are best answered by the professional responsible for their part of the intervention or investigation.

I’m also not sure that advising any individual of the specific questions or techniques used during the interview process would be helpful, and in fact this may taint their memory or possibly cause additional concerns or stress going into the interview.
How do you approach hand-offs to behavioral health?

After working with so many wonderful victim advocates and mental health professionals over the years, I have learned a great deal about this issue. The term “warm hand-off” is an important concept. What this means is that you make sure victims are personally introduced to the victim advocate or mental health professional, and that you attempt to answer any of the victim’s questions or concerns to the best of your ability. This is in contrast to simply giving the victim a card or a phone number to initiate contact on their own, which is far less likely to result in the victim actually accessing valuable services.

Of course, victims should be able to maintain as much control over the resources they utilize. If the victim requests or agrees to work with an advocate or mental health professional, a warm hand-off will enable both the victim and service provider an opportunity to get to know each other before they begin working together.

Trauma, Sexual Assault, and Police Response

I feel that not all sexual assaults are traumatic, at least in the way that people commonly understand that term, because many victims deny or minimize what happened to them. For example, one woman described a rape, but she said, “I woke up with an ‘oh shit’ feeling that quickly turned into an ‘oh well.’ I didn’t really feel I’d been violated, though part of me knew I had. I wasn’t mad. I wasn’t hurt. I didn’t want vengeance. I didn’t even feel weird around him soon after. I didn’t feel much of anything. I certainly didn’t feel like I’d been raped. But what had happened the night prior was not consensual sex, and I didn’t like it. I wanted the flirting. I wanted the kissing. I wanted the sleepover. But I didn’t want to go all the way. And that’s very hard to explain to a man who is just as drunk as you are.”

Therefore, when we talk about victim impact, as to how the person felt right after the rape, to weeks, months or even years after the experience – as well as their behaviors -- couldn’t anything be considered victim impact, and used as evidence that a rape occurred? For example, “adaptive” victim behaviors, such as partying, living life as normal, having consensual sex with the person who raped them, etc. Could these be seen as evidence of minimization or denial, which is a common characteristic that rape victims exhibit, and therefore evidence of the rape?

Human beings who have been through traumatic experiences such as combat, a car accident, or the death of a loved one are often changed by those experiences. Some of these changes can be positive and some may be negative. For example, it is not uncommon for someone who has experienced trauma to begin drinking more alcohol or using drugs. Some people may take more risks and put themselves in dangerous situations, or exhibit other maladaptive behaviors. Other people may have positive, or at least less harmful behaviors, such as refraining from drinking, being more vigilant about their safety, or seeking out counseling to improve their overall well-being.
None of these behaviors are evidence of trauma, in and of themselves. However, they may be corroborative of a traumatic experience, and they may help others understand the victim’s behaviors or decision-making.

The bottom line is this: It is essential to try to understand and document changes in the victim’s behavior, because this helps to understand the entire context, impact and breadth of the experience. This will allow decision-makers to make more informed judgments and have a far greater understanding of the totality of the circumstances.

**What happens when rape becomes normal?**

Normal is a relative term. It is also something human beings are motivated to achieve. One way we do this is through re-contextualization, which is a fancy way of saying we take negative experiences and try to fit them into our lives the best we can. This process can be a very long one for many people, and it is sometimes described as a “roller coaster ride” with all of its ups and downs.

One common example is child sexual abuse. Some children will normalize their experience by re-contextualizing it, in order to survive and to continue to have other very important needs met, even by the abuser. Domestic violence victims also frequently try to normalize their experience for many of the same reasons. What we know, however, is that trauma is life changing. While we as humans are pretty good at adapting to our situation and our environment, this process does leave us changed – for better or worse. Our experiences are a large factor in what makes us “us.”

Many people are raped repeatedly, by various people throughout their lives, and how they react can change. For example, they can become desensitized to rape and its many impacts. How do you deal with disclosures of past rapes, and to victims who appear to be less adversely impacted by rape as they adapt to it happening to them?

It is important to listen and attempt to understand an individual’s past experiences for many reasons. One reason is because our current behaviors are often a result of past experiences. In one stark example, a young woman reported that she was raped by an authority figure. This man came into her room, told her to remove her pants, and lay down on the bed. She did as she was told. He then raped her without the use of any physical force or threats of violence. Following the rape, the offender left the victim’s room and she began cleaning the room. She also sent him text messages apologizing for “making him do that.” In other words, she took all the blame.

This experience, including her behaviors and decision-making, were difficult to understand until she disclosed that she had previously been sexually abused by another authority figure in her childhood – her uncle. While describing the chronic sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her uncle, she mentioned that he would order her to remove her pants and lay down on the bed. She then described that after he raped her, her uncle would cry and make her apologize to him for “making him rape her.” She was conditioned by this adverse childhood experience in many ways.
Without this background information, most investigators would conclude that the incident was baseless because of the lack of force. Most people, including professionals working in this field and your average family member or neighbor would not believe that a full-grown woman would blindly obey the directives of another adult and then apologize for being raped. It is therefore critical that we do whatever we can to help people understand and appreciate how prior experiences and years of conditioning can significantly impact how a person might respond when abused later in life.

**How does an officer work with a victim who is now reporting a rape, but was also raped before and experienced a negative response from police when she reported it?**

The same as they would with any victim. The officer should begin by demonstrating genuine empathy, and then address any concerns the victim may have regarding any previous interaction with law enforcement or other victim blaming responses. These concerns are vitally important to address, because they will often become barriers to reporting or sharing significant information about their experiences.

**What if the new report is being made to the same agency, maybe even the same detective(s)?**

In that situation, it may be necessary to ask for a supervisor such as a sergeant to request a different detective, if at all possible. But, regardless of who does the interview, it will be critical that the victim has access to a victim advocate or other helping professionals if she/he chooses. An advocate or support person can help address the victim’s concerns and possibly even help supervisors, detectives and officers to think and respond in a more trauma informed manner.

**Resources**

**Is there an outline for the FETI approach?**

Yes, the basic outline of the FETI approach is included in the handouts for this webinar series, in EVAWI’s webinar archive. Handouts include both the presentation slides from this webinar, as well as a written description of the FETI methodology. You can also find more information on my website (www.russellstrand.com) or you can email me at russell.strand@gmail.com.

**Can we use your last slide as a FETI card to give out to our local law enforcement?**

Yes, you may feel free to use the last slide as a card for your agency.

However, as discussed earlier, I have some concerns because most first responders should not be conducting full FETI interviews because some aspects of FETI are not appropriate for an initial interview (e.g., sensory questions, asking about the most difficult part of the experience).
Another concern is the lack of training for people using FETI. Although the FETI methodology was designed to be as simple as possible for anyone to use, there should be a requirement for at least some basic instruction on the neuroscience of trauma, the impact of trauma, and the principles of the FETI methodology. Without some of this basic information, people may misunderstand or misuse FETI and potentially cause harm or shut the victim down. Therefore, I recommend at least some type of training before using the FETI methodology.

Additional response by EVAWI:

We offer a variety of training resources on the neurobiology of trauma and FETI interviews. For example, we have a Training Bulletin entitled, *Understanding the Neurobiology of Trauma and Implications for Interviewing Victims*. It was written by Dr. Chris Wilson, Dr. Kim Lonsway and Sgt. Joanne Archambault.

Also available is a 2-part webinar series on the topic of *Neurobiology of Sexual Assault*, presented by Dr. Jim Hopper. In Part 1, he discusses *Experience and Behavior*. Part 2 focuses on *Experience and Memory*.

This is in addition to the archived recording of this 2-part webinar series on the *Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI): A Trauma Informed Experience*. Part 1 provides an Overview of the FETI, while Part 2 focuses on Practical Application of the FETI.

*Do you know of anyone who will testify as an expert witness for neurobiology and trauma or neuroscience?*

This response is from EVAWI:

This issue is addressed in the responses we sent out following Dr. Jim Hopper’s 2-part webinar series on *Neurobiology of Sexual Assault*. You can access the material in our [webinar archive](http://www.evawintl.org)
References


