

## **Best Practices when Interviewing a Survivor of Sexual Assault<sup>1</sup>**

When interviewing a survivor of sexual assault during a legal services intake, it is important to keep in mind that the survivor has likely experienced an extreme amount of trauma and will likely experience stress and anxiety when asked to recount her/his story. The following points below will aid you as you interview survivors.

### **Interviewing Best Practices:**

- Remind your client that information they share for the purpose of obtaining legal services will remain confidential
  - Be sure to familiarize yourself with your organization's confidentiality policy so that you can better communicate this to your client
- Maximize trustworthiness
  - Work on first building rapport with your client. Start by asking your client a few less personal questions before asking more personal questions.
- Be aware of and sensitive to disparities between you and your client based on language or culture
  - An interpreter may be needed to resolve language disparities. For culture disparities, the interviewer may need to use simple and plain language rather than complex legal terms that your client may have difficulties understanding.
- Clarify what the client is saying
  - If you are unsure of what a client is communicating, ask clarifying questions until you have a good understanding of your client's message
- Utilize reflective listening, also known as active listening
  - Reflective listening is seeking to understand your client's idea, and then offering the idea back to the client to confirm the idea has been understood correctly.
    - Repeating or Rephrasing: The listener either repeats verbatim what was said, or uses words with similar meaning as rephrasing.
    - Paraphrasing: The listener uses his or her own words to paraphrase what the listener conveyed to him or her.
    - Reflection of feeling: The listener uses words which reflect feelings to deepen his or her form of communication. This is especially useful in helping to foster a sense of empathy
- Remember to focus and stay on topic
  - However, give your client breaks as needed during the interview process due to the stress producing nature of the interview
- Be empathetic, but also be cautious of compassion fatigue

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<sup>1</sup> This document has been prepared by Amara Legal Center Forensic Psychology interns Kayla Faulkner, Ashley Pearson, and Jazmyne Ferguson, spring 2014.

- Compassion fatigue occurs when one's personal energy stores have become depleted due to becoming overly empathic with your client
- Ways to help avoid compassion fatigue include:
  - Practicing good stress management on a daily basis
  - Making time for pleasurable activities
  - Maintaining healthy support systems
  - Working to achieve a balance between work and your personal life
  - Write in a personal journal about one good thing that happened to you each day
  - Remember to celebrate small victories and personal accomplishments
  - Make sure to get adequate sleep
  - Know and respect your limits! Take breaks throughout the work day as needed
- Use validation language throughout the interview
  - For example, phrases such as “I can only imagine” and “you’re very brave” show that you are validating the client’s personal experiences
- Avoid posing questions or using language in a way that sounds judgmental
- Be aware of and sensitive to victim-blaming
  - Remember that many of your clients will blame themselves for their sexual assault. **Assure your clients that sexual assault is never their fault.**