

# How to: Trauma-informed and Empathy-based Reporting

There are high rates of trauma among people who use drugs, have an active addiction, are in treatment or recovery, or love and support people having these experiences.

***Understanding that trauma can shape our interactions is an important step toward conducting ethical interviews with vulnerable, historically marginalized people that do not further harm*** the people sharing their stories with us. This toolkit was designed to help you reduce harm and have positive interactions when Reporting on Addiction.

## ***What is trauma-informed, empathy-based interviewing?***

Trauma-informed techniques assume a person has a lived experience with trauma and acknowledges the impact of trauma on that person’s life. Empathy-based techniques use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences that help the interviewer more deeply understand their stories and lived experiences.

## ***Why use trauma-informed, empathy-based interviewing?***

Using these techniques helps ***include*** our sources in the reporting process, as opposed to an extractive approach that can feel transactional. You can use these techniques to build or rebuild trust; dig deeper into a story; and, prevent re-traumatization or worsening trauma in those you’re interviewing. Trauma has a lifelong impact, therefore, journalists must do as little harm as possible to people participating in their stories.

## ***Who is this guide for?***

This guide is primarily focused on interviewing experts through experience. They include people who use drugs, have an active addiction, are in treatment, are in recovery, or love and support the people having these experiences. It is also important to recognize that there are experts through experience who are also experts through training therefore these approaches should be used whenever you are Reporting on Addiction.

### **✓ CONDENSED CHECKLIST FOR REPORTING**

- Get informed consent**
- Recognize the power imbalance**
- Remember person first**
- Keep in touch about story progress**
- Recognize your source may change their mind – and that’s okay**

## GETTING STARTED

## ✓ Get informed consent *before* sitting down for an on-the-record interview.

Journalists should explain how their source's story may be used and have a duty to inform them about the potential risks of participating in an interview. **Leave your gear behind for this initial conversation.**

- Explain why you're doing the interview, how you will use it, and where it will be published. Be specific.
  - Describe your reporting goals and explain how their story is relevant to the reporting.
  - *Review the sample script on page 5 to help you approach an interview subject.*
- Explain what it means to be on the record, off the record works, or on background. If they share a personal anecdote or detail that might be sensitive, clarify during the interview if they are ok with that being in the story.
- Discuss possible outcomes of sharing their story with you.
  - What are personal and professional consequences?
  - *Risks to consider are discussed in more detail on page 7.*
- Discuss options for anonymity and name changes. This also includes visual reporting. Review tips in Reporting on Addiction's visual guide for protecting sources in photo and video.
- Do not make promises in this conversation. Speak to your editor once you've explored how this person feels about participating. Be open to them changing their mind. Never insist that anonymity will be a problem for the story. Protecting sources outweighs other considerations.
- Explain that things can change and some parts of stories could be edited out. Their story could be cut, especially if you have multiple sources. Ideally, you will have more than one person represented in your reporting.
- Review the fact checking processes of your news outlet. Will you follow up to fact check? Your editor? Someone else? Describing this process and preparing a person who has experienced trauma to review their story with a new person can prepare them for the conversation mentally and emotionally.



### IMPORTANT TERMS

*These terms will help you understand the tips in this guide.*



#### **Informed Consent:**

Permission granted with knowledge of possible consequences. Typically given after a detailed explanation of when, where and how much of their story will be shared, in what ways.



#### **Trauma:**

An emotional response to a distressing or disturbing event.



#### **Empathy:**

The ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling.

## GETTING STARTED

## ✓ Recognize that there is an inherent power imbalance between a journalist and the person they are interviewing.

Use these techniques to bring more balance to that relationship:

- Consider bending the rules:
  - Give questions in advance
    - Make sure they understand you might ask follow-up questions depending on their answers
  - Encourage them to have someone they trust be there for support during the interview
  - Start with letting them tell you what questions they will and will not answer.
    - Listen and respect their boundaries
  - Let them review their quotes before you publish so they can understand how their story and images are used in the piece.
- Establish rules of engagement by reminding them:
  - They can take a break if they need
  - They can ask questions of the interviewer
  - They can stop the interview at any time



### Reframe:

You're working *together* to share their story

## ✓ Remember they are more than a person who uses drugs or an impacted family member.

Taking the time to get to know the person and gaining their trust requires patience and may take more than one interview.

- Ask open ended questions about their life beyond their addiction/recovery experiences. This will help you present a fuller picture of them within your story beyond their drug use or family trauma.
- Be a good listener
- Don't push back or correct their experience in the moment

### Additional Reporting Resources:

- [Dart Center Style Guide for Trauma-informed Journalism](#)
- [The Center for Health Journalism at USC Annenberg](#)
- [American Press Institute's empathetic newsroom](#)
- [Trauma Aware Journalism project](#)

## GETTING STARTED

## ✓ Keeping in touch with the person is integral to empathy-based reporting.

- Sources are not disposable. Genuine effort will help you establish they are more than a source for a story. They are a person.
- Check on their well-being after the interview. Discussing lived experiences is difficult and draining. Remember though, there is a boundary between being supportive and being a therapist. If they need additional help, a referral to 9-8-8 or [findtreatment.gov](https://www.findtreatment.gov) is appropriate.
- Send them periodic updates on the story's progress, including possible publication dates (or estimates) or publication delays or changes to how much/how little their story may be included.
- Thank them for sharing their story with you and your audience.

## ✓ Recognize that an interview subject may change their mind about participating in your story, and that's okay.

- Don't rely on a single personal experience for your story. This creates an overwhelming sense of pressure for your source to share details they may not be comfortable with.
- Discuss the implications of a subject changing their mind with your editor/newsroom leaders. In an ideal world, a source should be allowed to pull themselves from a story even after publication. If they are experiencing additional harm or trauma from participating in any element of the interviewing, writing, editing or publication process, they have the right to protect themselves by reversing their decision, and we should uphold the journalistic standard of **Do No Harm**.
- Communicate clearly with your source in advance the guidelines your editor has laid out for revoking their story before, during or after the publication date.



### **Reframe:**

The person in front of you is more important than the story in front of you

## PREPARING YOUR SOURCE

### The ask:

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- Include a clear subject line.
- Include relevant credentials, job title, and a description of your outlet.
- Explain what you are writing about, and why you think this person would be important to speak with.
- With your pitch include a brief bio and link to your other articles on the subject.
- Let the subject know how much time the conversation will take, even if just an estimate.
- Give them your deadline.
- Provide your contact information.
- Invite the subject to schedule a call or in-person meeting to explore the story further and ask any questions before the interview.

### The script:

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Hi **[Subject]** -

My name is **[Name]**, and I am a journalist with **[Name of Outlet]**. **[Describe outlet - online, tv, audio]**. I am working on a story about addiction as it relates to **[specific topic/idea]**.

I saw/heard **[how you heard about their story/referral source]** and I wondered if you would be willing to discuss **[topic]** with me in an interview. It should only take **[time]**.

I hope to have the story to my editor by **[deadline]**.

I am happy to have a phone call or meet with you in person to talk about the story and answer any questions before you decide whether you'd like to participate. My contact information is below.

Thank you for your time,  
**[Name]**  
**[Contact information]**

## INTERVIEW GUIDE: CONSIDERATIONS AND EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

AVOID	INSTEAD
<p>...asking difficult questions first.</p>	<p>...ease into the discussion, start with the personal and everyday.</p>
<p>...pushing back, arguing or correcting their experience or language in the moment.</p>	<p>...follow up after for clarification.</p>
<p>...asking, “How do you feel?”</p>	<p>...ask, “How are you now?” or, “What do you think about...”</p>
<p>...relying on a single person’s experience.</p>	<p>...have at least three people’s experiences included.</p>
<p>...starting an interview without established boundaries.</p>	<p>...ask them what topics they don’t want to talk about or what boundaries they’d rather not cross.</p>

## RISKS TO CONSIDER WHEN INTERVIEWING

**People who use drugs, have an active addiction, are in treatment, or are in recovery face severe threats to their autonomy and well-being when talking with the media. Some sources are not aware of these risks. Others think that the value of sharing their story outweighs them. It is important that you ensure they are aware of the risks that can come from sharing their stories.**

Although the situations in the informed consent example on the next page may seem hyperbolic, these examples are very real and come with serious consequences in the lives of many people in active addiction, treatment or recovery. Journalists cannot afford to further these harms.

These risks increase with the level of detail provided. Consider whether this detail is essential to the story or unnecessarily sensationalizing it.

People use drugs for a variety of reasons, some may return to use shortly after your interview. Understand that this is not anyone's fault. Recalling trauma can take an emotional toll. It's challenging even in private settings to recall trauma, all the more so during an interview when the end result is their trauma being made publicly available.

*These risks are not hypothetical or hyperbolic.* There are many examples in case law. Additionally, ask any experts through experience and experts through training and they will likely have a story about discrimination faced by people who use drugs, including when sharing their story or talking with the media. We can not afford to perpetuate these harms any longer, **journalists must do no harm.**

### Monitor Your Health

We know that journalists can experience second hand trauma while reporting on sensitive topics. This can look like:

- Inability to concentrate
- Inability to feel compassion for sources
- Loss of sleep
- Excessive anger or fatigue

There are a variety of resources for journalists experiencing second hand trauma. Check with your workplace to see what resources are available if you're feeling overwhelmed or off. These can include Employee Assistance Programs (short-term, free mental health services), time off, change of assignment, etc. Other resources include:

- [Dart Center Self-Care resources](#)
- [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#)

## INFORMED CONSENT

The person you're interviewing may not know how to protect their interests when sharing these stories, especially if they have not interacted with the media before. It is important to **have multiple conversations with them** to ensure everyone understands the risks associated with talking to you.

It is likely you need to have more than one conversation with your source to make sure they have a **complete understanding of what they are agreeing to when they say yes to an interview**. Informed consent often feels like you're trying to talk a source out of doing the story, but it should be that level of consent in order to be trauma-informed.

### The Script for an Initial Conversation:

I want to talk with you about the risks that can come from speaking with the media. We know that talking about drug use, even if it is in the past, can result in discrimination that affects your housing, education, employment, health care, social or business opportunities. It might also affect your family, community members and organizations that work in this space. For example, people have been removed from their apartments for disclosing an addiction in a media article. Others have lost their jobs.

**Laws and regulations intended to protect people from discrimination remain unenforced and cumbersome to pursue. The harm you may face can be immediate. The legal solution can take significantly longer (if ever).**

Other harms may not be illegal, but can still be challenging to navigate. For example, people may experience personal embarrassment from seeing the details of their story published. Negative online comments about the story or you personally can be difficult and destabilizing for you or your family. This criticism from your public disclosure can also come from unexpected places, including your recovery community.

I want to make sure you're aware of these risks and that you have discussed them with your loved ones before we continue with the story. Before we talk more, I would recommend talking with a trusted person (a friend, family member, health care provider, sponsor) to receive feedback on your story so you can refine your message and establish boundaries before the interview.

### Check in Again at Start of Interview:

Before we start, did you consider:

- Do your family members know your story? Your extended family?
- Does your landlord, neighbors who live in close proximity or roommates know your story?
- Does your boss or coworkers know?
- How will sharing your story impact those relationships as well as your safety in those areas of your life?



**CHECK YOUR BIAS:**

**AN EXERCISE IN SELF-REFLECTION AND EMPATHY**

Everyone has bias. Some of this is a result of how our brain works – taking shortcuts to be efficient and conserve resources – but in some situations, those biases can be harmful. Self-reflection is a powerful way to confront bias and become a more empathetic journalist.

Bias about addiction, even unintentional, is *deeply stigmatizing and can lead to discrimination* which further marginalizes an already at-risk population. More than half a million people per year die preventable deaths associated with drug use and addiction. More than 20 million people are in long-term recovery. People affected by addiction are part of your audience and we have a duty to **do no harm**.

Reporting on Addiction provides a unique opportunity to connect with people who use drugs, are in active addiction, treatment or recovery.

In this exercise, take a moment to put yourself in the shoes of your sources and challenge how you think about drug use and addiction.

Examine Your Assumptions	Further Considerations
<p><b>What personal experiences have you had with drug use, addiction or recovery?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you think this shapes your understanding of these topics?</li> <li>• Do you think about your ability to “control” your substance use or abstinence?</li> <li>• How does this shape your thoughts about other people's drug use, past or present?</li> </ul>
<p><b>What are your personal beliefs about why people use drugs?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you have used drugs, why might you have used them?</li> <li>• If you haven't or don't, why not?</li> <li>• What do you think are the differences between people who use drugs occasionally and don't experience problems and those who use regularly and experience problems?</li> <li>• Are there structural or personal characteristics that might affect someone's risk profile?</li> </ul>

**CHECK YOUR BIAS**

<p><b>Examine Your Assumptions</b></p>	<p><b>Further Considerations</b></p>
<p><b>When you think about drug addiction, what image pops into your head?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the person look a certain way?</li> <li>• Do they use a certain drug? What are your thoughts about how this person became addicted?</li> <li>• Do you believe that addicted people are weak, lazy, immoral, criminals or sinful?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Do you accept certain types of addictions more than others?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you believe that addiction to illicit drugs is different or worse than addiction to legal drugs?</li> <li>• Do people addicted to pain medicine deserve more understanding than people addicted to heroin or fentanyl?</li> <li>• What about a pregnant person addicted to drugs?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Do you believe that some people are beyond help?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you believe that it is easier to recover from certain addictions than others?</li> <li>• Do you believe that some people will simply never get better?</li> <li>• What would you think if someone said this was my # treatment attempt?</li> <li>• What do you think about public health interventions that do not require abstinence?</li> <li>• What kind of role does the criminal justice system play when it comes to addressing drug use or addiction?</li> </ul>

## About Reporting on Addiction

*We are a 501c3-supported organization dedicated to increasing the accuracy and empathy of reporting on addiction. To accomplish this, Reporting on Addiction provides innovative training, technical assistance, and resources for journalists, journalism educators, experts through training, and experts through experience.*

### **We work to:**

- *Improve the themes/story narratives chosen by journalists.*
- *Improve the language used by journalists.*
- *Improve the images/videos created by journalists.*

