MAY 2021

A Guide: Promising practices for engaging survivors in research

WomanACT
WOMAN ABUSE COUNCIL OF TORONTO

Prepared and written by Emma Anderson
Editing support by Alissa Klingbaum and Lieran Docherty

Summary of recommendations

- Researchers should try to create a safe and open space when engaging with survivors in research.
- Participation should be voluntary and provide easy options for participants to withdraw without permanent exclusions.
- Researchers should practice self-awareness and reflect on their motives for research and reconsider engaging survivors if their motives are not rooted in open and honest inquiry.
- Researchers should avoid asking survivors to detail or describe their trauma.
- Interviews with survivors should be collaborative where they feel heard and empowered.
- Researchers should prioritize confidentiality in the interview process and assure survivors that their personal information will remain anonymous.
- If the safety of a survivor is threatened at any stage of research, researchers can offer a variety of support services. It is recommended that researchers be prepared with contact information for crisis lines or support services in the event a survivor wants support or needs immediate assistance.
- Virtual interviews with survivors should be made as safe as possible, which may include paying for the cost a VPN.
- Compensation in the form of cash should be offered to survivors for their participation in research.

Introduction

Purpose

This guide was developed to support researchers in engaging survivors both ethically and positively in research. This guide also considers the challenges of conducting research during a pandemic and how researchers can work effectively to collaborate with survivors in a changing environment.

A Note from the Authors

The WomanACT team will continue to edit and add to this document to reflect our learning. This document not does not purport to be a reflection of all promising practices, but the goal is to help guide researchers and further the dialogue.

When and How to Use this Document

This document is intended to serve as a guideline and tip-sheet to be used internally by WomanACT and externally by partners. It can be used as a tool for organizations and/or researchers who are working to be more survivor-centred and trauma-informed in their work.

Defining Key Terms

Survivor: A person who has experienced abuse and interpersonal trauma. This definition is used by 'Survivors Voices' and was "developed to signify people moving away from being passive 'victims' to active overcomers of their experiences" (Chevous & Perôt, 2019).

Good Engagement: The mutual understanding among researchers and survivors of the benefits of being involved in research, with survivors feeling heard and empowered. Good engagement means that the researcher is self-aware and reflective of their communication with survivors. They pay close attention to potential triggers and work to create an environment that is collaborative.

Sources and persons consulted

While this document draws from multiple sources outlining promising practices, asking those with lived experience and consulting survivor-led organizations is imperative to creating a guide made for researchers. WomanACT is committed to continuous and ongoing dialogue with survivors and survivor-led organizations who are willing to share what they consider to be promising practices and good engagement.

Before the Interview

Why survivors may not want to engage in research

Survivors may not wish to participate in research for a number of reasons, including: survivors' guilt and shame about the abuse; underreporting or ambivalence toward unwanted or non-consensual sexual incidents; normalization and perceived "inevitability" of unwanted sexual advances or physical abuse; and not wanting the perpetrator to get in trouble with the law (Ordway, 2018). This is not an exhaustive list and there may be additional reasons that survivors do not want to participate. Understanding why survivors may decline research interviews or engagement is key to understanding how researchers can be accountable and do better in engaging survivors in research. Researchers must also acknowledge that not all survivors will wish to participate in research and that this choice is valid.

Why survivors engage in research and what leads them to accept research interviews

Talking about and recounting experiences of abuse is often very painful, traumatic and re-abusive. However, it is also described by some survivors as an important part of their healing process and recognizing the abuse. Being asked about their experience can help survivors break the silence and can be releasing, transformative, and healing (Chevous & Perôt, 2017). With this in mind, researchers should not be afraid to ask questions, but must be empathetic in the way they ask.

Impactful and good engagement is collaborative and should empower survivors to have agency over their involvement in research and in what capacity they wish to engage (Chevous & Perôt, 2019). Research may be facilitated and led by survivors or in collaboration with supporting organizations. Survivors should have a large influence over the scope of research, the research questions and the methodology.

Researchers should have knowledge and an understanding about the complexities of abuse

A lack of knowledge about the complexities of abuse can compromise the interview process and re-traumatize a survivor. Ideally, researchers engaging with survivors need to be well-informed about abuse and its impact on those who have experienced it. When a researcher is knowledgeable about the complexities of abuse, the better and more helpful the interview experience can be for survivors (Campbell et al., 2009).

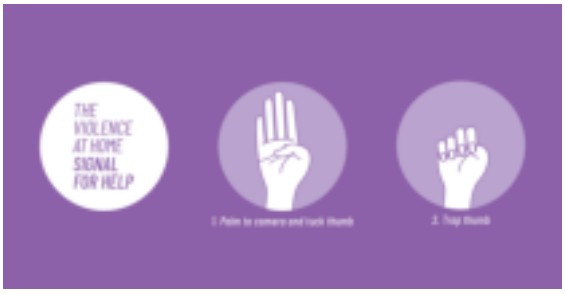
Safe contact

Safe contact with survivors engaging in research is important because some survivors are still living with their abuser or may have their communication monitored by a partner or ex-partner. An abuser will most likely not be supportive of a survivor engaging in research activities pertaining to their experiences. If safe contact is not established early on in the research process, a survivor may be at increased risk of being discovered and harmed by their abuser. It is suggested that researchers give the survivor the option of using a code word when contacting one another to indicate whether it is safe or not safe to speak. For example, a code word/phrase indicating that it is not a good time to speak could be, “I’m just about to do laundry, are we still on for coffee on Friday?”. A phrase that researchers should avoid using is, “you have the wrong number”. This phrase may raise suspicion with the abuser.

It can be common that a survivor does not answer at a scheduled time, not identify themselves or end the contact abruptly during a communication. It is suggested that the researcher does not attempt to contact the research participant if this happens. Instead, the researcher should wait for the survivor to make contact. It may be that it is not a good time to speak or it is unsafe. It may also be that the survivor no longer wishes to participate in the research.

It is recommended that prior to an interview, the researchers establishes a code word or a signal for help with the participant. The researcher may find it helpful to review the Signal for Help with the research participant (via Canadian Women's Foundation). As is recommended by the Dandelion Initiative, the researcher can say something like:

> "Here is the Signal for Help. If you are in immediate or emergent danger and want us to help, please use the Signal for Help on your video. When you use the signal [detail what will happen]."



Source: The Dandelion Initiative, & Canadian Women's Foundation.

You can also call one of these crisis lines if you are looking for support: [crisis lines that serve your area]." (The Dandelion Initiative & Canadian Women's Foundation, 2020). Researchers can also copy and paste the image below to the chat box so the research participant can refer to it should they need it. A verbal signal for help such as a word or phrase may also be useful for interviews that do not have a video component.

When the researcher is a survivor

Conducting research on abuse can be traumatizing and draining to a researcher, especially a researcher with lived experience of abuse. Organizations should acknowledge that a survivor conducting research may unintentionally lead to overworking and disassociation in an attempt to be resilient and get the work done (Chevous & Perôt, 2019). Organizations should support researchers and participants who are survivors, allowing them to be vocal and honest about their challenges and days that are more difficult, and when they are unable to meet research tasks and deadlines (Chevous & Perôt, 2019). To address this, organizations should ensure they have a plan of action and perhaps have two researchers or facilitators involved in the project (Chevous & Perôt, 2019).

COVID-19 and its challenges

Now, more than ever, it is important to avoid adding additional stress to already stressful circumstances. The pandemic has further exacerbated pre-existing stressors and challenges in the everyday lives of many, especially survivors. Survivors and researchers may have extra responsibilities such as child-care and financial constraints. In some instances, survivors are living with their abuser and unable to access resources or support, particularly during a lockdown. Therefore, the goal of every researcher engaging with survivors should be to not add to the challenges they already face. Some ways to avoid contributing to stress include offering research participants multiple dates and times to choose from and being prepared in the event the engagement time is missed or rescheduled.

How to engage in research virtually

Privacy: Researchers and research organizations can pay for the costs of VPNs and other digital security measures to preserve privacy (Saska, 2020). Researchers should avoid relying on social media as a means of communication with survivors (Saska, 2020). However, if a survivor wishes to communicate via social media platforms, every effort should be made to ensure it is a safe way to connect. The subsequent points describe ways in which researchers can ensure safe contact with research participants.

Options for contact: Researcher should provide survivors engaging in research with options for communicating, including a phone call or video call.

When the survivor agrees to a video call:

a. Face-to-face interaction can help to create safety and rapport (The Dandelion Initiative, 2020).

b. The researcher should let the survivor know that while being on video is appreciated, that their boundaries and choice will be respected should they choose to turn it off (The Dandelion Initiative, 2020).

c. The researcher should introduce the online platforms and its functions that are available to use (The Dandelion Initiative, 2020).

During the Interview

Building Trust

Researchers may feel inclined to rush the conversation and have all questions answered. However, to build a trusting and collaborative relationship with the survivor, researchers should allow the survivor to go at their own pace and set the tone and rhythm of the conversation. Disrupting the flow, especially when done virtually or over the phone (where facial expressions or body language are not seen) can create an environment where a survivor may feel unheard or invalidated. It is important to allow the survivor to fully finish their story or answer the posed question.

Confidentiality

The researcher can reassure the survivor that their personal information and any identifying information such as such as names, name of workplaces etc. will not be disclosed or published. The researcher should be transparent and inform the survivors about how the information and data provided will be used, whether in a final written report or that some parts of their experience may be published in articles and/or social media. Unless they want to be named, researchers should not include research participant names in research reports. However, researchers can offer this as an option, as some people find it empowering (Chevous & Perôt, 2017).

Language

The language researchers use is a crucial element of communicating effectively and sensitively with survivors. While it is important to try to avoid all triggers that may remind a person of their abuse, it is impossible as everyone's experience is different and unique. Survivors Voice, a survivor-led non-profit, offers suggestions in creating an open and non-judgmental space, which includes encouraging survivors to talk about their experiences as much or as little as they want and at their own pace. It can also be helpful to provide trigger warnings and reassure the research participant that it is okay if they choose to end the interview early.

Safe space

Before the interview begins, the researcher should let the participant know that they are in control and that if they need to pause or stop to take a break it is absolutely okay. The environment should be made as safe as possible, including letting the participant know they can ask questions or say anything they want before the interview starts and assuring that all questions and emotions are allowed (Anderson & Thorvaldsdottir).

Creating a safe space and building trust can take time. The researcher should ensure the participant that there is shared power in terms of communication. The researchers should invite the research participant to voice if they are triggered or uncomfortable and to only share what feels comfortable to them (Chevous & Perôt, 2017).

The researcher should enable participants to describe their experiences and recovery using their own timeline and flow whether it is helpful or unhelpful to the research. A survivor detailing their experiences may not be linear or thematic. To avoid any implication that a survivor has fabricated their experience, researchers should be cautious when using terms such as ‘story’, ‘narrative’, and ‘alleged’. Instead use terms such as ‘experiences’, ‘accounts’ and ‘journey’ (Chevous & Perôt, 2017).

Researchers should not ask anyone to detail or describe their trauma. If personal questions about themselves (gender, age etc.) and their experience (start of abuse and what type) are going to be asked, warn survivors that they may find some questions uncomfortable or triggering (Chevous & Perôt, 2017).

Before the interview begins, the researcher should let the research participant know that they are in control and that if they need to pause or stop to take a break it is absolutely okay. The environment should be made as safe as possible, including letting the participant know they can ask questions or say anything they want before the interview starts and assuring that all questions and emotions are allowed (Anderson & Thorvaldsdottir).

The researcher should enable people to describe their experiences and recovery using their own timeline and flow whether it is helpful or unhelpful to the research. A survivor detailing their experiences may not be linear or thematic. To avoid any implication that a survivor has fabricated their experience, the researcher should be cautious when using terms such as ‘story’, ‘narrative’, and ‘alleged’. Instead use terms such as ‘experiences’, ‘accounts’ and ‘journey’ (Chevous & Perôt, 2017).

The researcher should try to avoid asking the participant to detail trauma. Questions that ask the survivors to detail their trauma can be uncomfortable and invasive (Anderson & Thorvaldsdottir). Survivors want to be in control of how much information they offer regarding their trauma and the aftermath of the trauma (Anderson & Thorvaldsdottir). The researcher should remind the survivor that the level of detail they are comfortable with offering is the right amount, so they feel they are encouraged to set healthy boundaries around their experiences (Anderson & Thorvaldsdottir).

While the researcher may feel inclined to build a connection with the survivor and come to a common ground, some boundaries should be maintained. When conducting an interview, researchers should avoid disclosing or sharing personal information about experiences with violence, whether it be personally or by proxy. This can be especially harmful when researchers use their own experiences to make a comparison. A survivor is taking the time to be open and vulnerable and potentially share their experience, allow them the space to feel seen and heard.

Check in

During the interview, the researcher may want to ask the participant if they would like to continue or take a pause periodically, as researchers should be mindful that reliving trauma can be emotionally draining. Engagement must be a voluntary process and easy to withdraw from at any point where there is no fear of permanent exclusion (Chevous & Perôt, 2019). Good engagement with a survivor or survivors is intended to be liberating and can help some feel that they are regaining their power and control.

Providing help and support

If the research participant signals for help and/or indicates that they are in immediate or emergent danger it is recommended the researcher remain calm and take the following steps:

If the researcher is communicating verbally or writing questions down on a piece of paper to display on camera, ask questions that can be answered with either “yes” or “no”. This may help avoid growing suspicion if someone (e.g., the perpetrator) is listening (The Dandelion Initiative & Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2020). Then the researcher should proceed to ask the following questions:

a. Are you in immediate danger?
b. Do you want me to call the police?
c. If they say yes, ask: “can you give me your address?” Police can only trace a 911 call if it’s from a landline, so this is very important (The Dandelion Initiative & Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2020).
d. After they provide you with their address, “tell them to stay with you on the line and go somewhere safer (somewhere with a locked door or near a door or window) or to hide” (The Dandelion Initiative & Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2020).
e. Stay on the line with them until the police arrive.
e. If they say no to calling the police, proceed to ask if they would like the contact information for shelters and/or crisis hotlines in their area (The Dandelion Initiative & Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2020).

After the Interview

Thank the participant

It is important that he researcher acknowledge the experience of the survivor and thank the for sharing their personal experience, ideas and thoughts. Providing an example of their contribution or an idea they had can help demonstrate that they were heard.

Acknowledge their willingness to share

It takes strength to share one's story, especially one that is particularly painful and traumatic. Some survivors perceive themselves as weak, a burden, or are ashamed as a result of their experience. Choosing to speak out and engage in research relating to trauma takes an incredible amount of courage. It is important for the researcher to acknowledge their willingness as well as the importance of their engagement in research and social change that comes from research.

Compensation

Survivors are agreeing to give their time and energy to research; therefore, it is encouraged that researchers compensate survivors for sharing their time and expertise. Compensation should ideally be offered in the form of cash as it gives the survivor greater choice about how the compensation will be used. During COVID, however, this may be difficult as face-to-face meet ups are restricted and sending money in the mail is not secure and may lead to suspicion from the abuser, if they are living with the survivor. Researchers should ask survivors how they would like to be compensated. It is recommended that e-gift cards are sent to the survivor's personal email address. When engaging survivors in research, WomanACT has found that the majority of survivors requested Amazon gift cards.

Special Acknowledgments

Survivors Voices

The WomanACT team would like to thank the team at Survivors Voices for their work in uncovering promising practices when engaging with survivors and for granting permission to draw on their charter for inspiration. For more information about their charter please refer to the following link: https://survivorsvoices.org/charter/.

The Dandelion Initiative

The WomanACT team would like to thank the team at The Dandelion Initiative for their work on gender-based violence prevention and survivor support and for granting permission to draw on their guideline for survivor-centered digital best practices.

Thordis Elva Thorvaldsdottir

The WomanACT team would like to thank Thordis for her advocacy in gender equality and commitment to social change and for sharing her thoughts on promising practices when engaging survivors in research.

References

Anderson, E., & Thorvaldsdottir, T. E. (2020, November 17). Suggestions for Promising Practices. personal.

Aroussi, S. (2019). Researching Wartime Rape in Eastern Congo: Why We Should Continue to Talk to Survivors? Sage Journals. https://doi.org/https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1468794119884880

Campbell, et al., R. (2009). Training Interviewers for Research on Sexual Violence: A Qualitative Study of Rape Survivors' Recommendations for Interview Practice, 15, 1–23. https://doi.org/https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1077801208331248

Campbell, et al., R. (2010). "What Has It Been Like for You to Talk With Me Today?": The Impact of Participating in Interview Research on Rape Survivors. Research Gate. https://doi.org/https://www.researchgate.net/publication/40042328_What_Has_It_Been_Like_for_You_to_Talk_With_Me_Today_The_Impact_of_Participating_in_Interview_Research_on_Rape_Survivors

Chevous, J., & Perôt, C. (2017, November). Blueprint for Change: Survivors Voices in partnership with Kings College, London. Survivors Voices. https://survivorsvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Blueprint-Pilot-Survey-Report-2017.pdf.

Chevous, J., & Perôt, C. (2019). Turning Pain into Power: A Charter for Organisations Engaging Abuse Survivors in Projects, Research & Service Development. Survivors Voices.

Chevous, J., & Perôt, C. (2019). Turning Pain into Power: A Charter for Organisations Engaging Abuse Survivors in Projects, Research & Service Development. Survivors Voices.

The Dandelion Initiative, & Canadian Women's Foundation. (2020) Signalling for Emergencies: Using the Signal for Help During Online Workshops, Groups, and Gatherings. Toronto; The Dandelion Initiative.

The Dandelion Initiative. Survivor-Centred Digital Best Practices; For Online Workshops, Groups, and Gatherings. Toronto; The Dandelion Initiative.

Ordway, D.-M. (2018). Why Many Sexual Assault Survivors May Not Come Forward for Years. Journalist's Resource. https://doi.org/journalistsresource.org/studies/government/criminal-justice/sexual-assault-report-why-research/

RAINN. Key Terms and Phrases. RAINN. http://www.rainn.org/articles/key-terms-and-phrases.

Saska, S. (2020, November). The Covid-19 Shadow Pandemic: Impacts & Recovery. The COVID-19 Shadow Pandemic, Impacts and Recovery Panel. Toronto; Canada.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Gender-based Violence. UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/gender-based-violence.html.

Wheeler, S. (2020, October 28). New Guide Gives Good Advice on Interviewing Rape Survivors. Human Rights Watch. http://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/25/new-guide-gives-good-advice-interviewing-rape-survivors.