

Emotional and Psychological Support Guidelines for the Life Stories CURA Project

Introduction

Interviewing and working with people who have fled situations of genocide, war, and other mass violence necessarily involves asking questions and delving into experiences which can be very difficult to recount. For this reason, it is important to be aware that the interview process may have an emotional impact on the interviewee and the interviewer, and to be prepared to be sensitive to this impact no matter how seriously or mildly it presents itself. The availability of psychological support for all project participants and team members is a central principle in the CURA project's ethics protocol, and therefore it is imperative that all interviewers present the various options to all interviewees clearly and with sensitivity.

The interviewer's job is twofold: a) to be sensitive and human during all stages of the interview process, thus providing an informal sort of "emotional support" themselves, and b) to provide our list of resources to the interviewee and to encourage them to make use of these resources should they feel the need. The interviewer's role is not to determine whether or not the person they are interviewing may or may not be exhibiting signs of trauma, but rather it is to make sure that all of our resources available to every interviewee, regardless of what symptoms they do or do not display, and to allow the interviewee to determine their level of need themselves. As the interview process involves engaging and collaborating with the interviewee in the process of collecting their life history in a fairly intimate way, this space should also be conducive to being sensitive and supportive for what may come up emotionally.

The showing of emotional distress during an interview can be a very normal thing. They are, after all, recounting very difficult memories. Therefore, interviewers should not automatically worry about emotion shown during the interview. While many terms related to post-war psychological distress are thrown around in everyday speech, such as "trauma" and "post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)," these terms can be useful to psychiatric and psychological experts in specific contexts, but they are not particularly useful for interviewers who are more interested in being supportive of all their interviewees regardless of diagnosis. Do not to focus on the question of trauma when dealing with an interviewee's emotional state—it is not your role. Your role is to collect life stories, and to forge a relationship with the interviewee within that context—we are not therapists and we are not talking to interviewees about their stories within the context of helping them heal. While that is a noble pursuit, it is not ours, and our resource list can refer the interviewee to someone more appropriate for such work. Again, our role as interviewers is to be sensitive to the needs of all our interviewees, and it should not matter how "severe" someone's case is; the same standard of sensitivity, support and humanity should be offered to every interviewee. It can be a positive quality for the interviewer to not be a trauma expert—this allows for a more informal support relationship

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between interviewer and interviewee, which is less heavy and stigmatized, and likely enough for most interviewees.

Another reason to think of this process as one of general emotional support rather than dealing with trauma is that healthy emotional reactions to terrible events may very much overlap symptoms of trauma, such as nightmares, flashbacks, and mood swings. Because some distress is a very human reaction to the interview experience, it is important not to assume that any displays of behaviours such as the above examples are necessarily “abnormal”. Distress exists on a continuum. The interviewee has likely lived with their experiences for a very long time, and as a result, they are likely to go into an interview aware that it may take an emotional toll on them, although the reactions of a person for whom the event in question happened long ago, and for whom it happened more recently, may differ. It is important not to assume that all distress will necessarily require the treatment of professionals: the majority of psychological support should take place within the interview space, through things such as the passing of a tissue, an empathetic nod, and other everyday, human ways in which we show concern and empathy for one another.

If an interviewee does find the process more distressing than they can handle, they will be able to make use of the services that we will offer to them. However, even if we are profoundly concerned for someone’s wellbeing, we cannot make the decision to seek help on their behalf. It will always be their choice.

CURA Protocol for Providing Psychosocial Support

Before embarking on interviews, all interviewers will be given a list of resources to give to interviewees by their team leader, which will be a combination of psychological counseling options (based out of Concordia’s Counseling Services), more culturally specific psychosocial options, as well as other resources, such as the university’s ethics officer. The list will be a list of “resources” that is meant to be more general than just psychological resources. The leader of your interview team will be the principal contact for any questions about these resources and referring interviewees to them.

Every step of the process should take place with the context elaborated in the previous section in mind. The protocol for introducing and encouraging the use of these resources is as follows:

1. **Pre-interview:** The first discussion of our resources should happen during the pre-interview, during the discussion of how the project will work, and the ethics. Interviewees must be presented with a list of resources along with their copy of their consent form. The interviewer should explain what the resources are, and should try to do so with sensitivity, emphasizing that this is a service that we offer to all interviewees. Interviewers should keep in mind the cultural contexts in which they are interviewing, and thus the potential taboos around topics of psychological support or distress, and therefore try to present the material in a way that is encouraging rather than alienating.

2. **The Interview:** During the interview, the interviewer should, above all, *listen* to the interviewee. The interview is about collecting a life story, and not about gauging levels of psychological distress. While listening, the interviewer may notice a lot of things in the interviewee's manner of speaking, such as: silences, a lot of jumping around in the narrative, emotional "highs" and "lows" that are sudden and varying, flashbacks or "relivings" of memories. As was stated above, while all of these can be signs of greater distress, they can also be a perfectly "normal" way for the interviewee to process and share their experiences. The interviewer should not jump to the conclusion that any signs of distressed behaviour are an indication of the former, and they should view these in the context of the whole interview. If the interviewer does become concerned that the interviewee is showing signs of considerable distress during the interview, the interviewer should ask them if they are ok and/or should offer to stop whenever the person would like.

Signs of more serious distress may include someone clearly losing touch with reality, someone trapped in a repetitive narrative with an inability to break out of it, someone emotionally "out of control" (be they feelings of rage, sadness, etc). As even these symptoms are vague, this is again a question of the interviewer listening to their intuition about when a situation is becoming too much, and of offering solutions in normal human ways (such as "do you need a break?" or offering a glass of water, or even to end the interview and continue another time).

Unless the interviewee is clearly become too distressed to function normally, the interviewer's role during the interview should be to be human and supportive, and to respond to any psychological distress that comes up the way they would respond to a friend—through empathy, active listening, and small gestures that help the person feel respected and listened to. This sort of behaviour will likely cover the vast majority of "psych support" that happens in the project.

At the end of the interview, the interviewer should take a few minutes to gently make the transition from the interview back to the present, through small talk and transitional discussion. Do not end the interview abruptly, and especially do not leave immediately.

3. **Immediately after the interview:** While the interviewer writes their 24-hour report, the interviewer can include a short reflection on any distress they witnessed, only if they feel that it is necessary. This is largely a reminder to themselves about whether or not they think it would be helpful to follow up with the person to make sure they're ok.

The training coordinator and interview team leader for the project will also be checking in with interviewers during this process to make sure they are comfortable with what is happening in the interview, and to discuss strategies for dealing with anything that may be arising.

4. **Follow-up:** Due to the project policy of doing multiple interviews where possible, the interviewer will already likely be having follow-up contact with the interviewee. *If* the interviewer is concerned that the interviewee is experiencing psychological distress, they should use their follow-up contact to also ask how they are coping after the interview, and again offer the available services. The interviewer should try to do so in a timely manner. Again, this step is up to the discretion of the interviewer about that person's needs, and it is a matter of highlighting our services again, but respecting the interviewee's decisions no matter what.
5. **Self-care:** The interviewer should be aware of their own limits. As relationships build between interviewers and interviewees, it is clear that most of the support that the interviewee needs may happen in that space. Nevertheless, interviewers should not feel obligated to play the role of a counselor, and they should refer people to resources where appropriate as opposed to taking the role of support entirely on themselves.

Support for Interviewers

The process of interviewing people who have survived mass violence can be taxing on the interviewer as well. It is normal to feel fear during this process, and to have anxiety going into the interview. Some interviewers may have difficulty listening to interviewees because their stories will remind them too closely of their own experiences—others may feel distressed because they are not used to listening to such intense stories. Either way, like in the case of the interviewee, it is normal to have an emotional reaction to the interview process. The best tool for dealing with the emotional consequences of interviewing on this topic is to be self-aware, to know one's own limits, and to be able to identify when the process is becoming too much. Interviewers should also think about what they plan to do after their interviews—should you go back to work immediately, or maybe take some time to go for a coffee, take a walk, relax at home, etc? Coping strategies for processing difficult knowledge can be very simple, but each person should identify what works best for them.

When an interviewer is conducting their first interviews, they will be in contact with the interview and training coordinators regularly, which is a great time to bring up any anxiety which they may have regarding the psychological issues that may be presenting themselves during the interviews. Interviewers should use these opportunities to discuss their concerns and to brainstorm strategies for dealing with them.

Furthermore, the project will hold project-wide regular debriefing meetings, which will be used primarily to discuss the interviews that have been conducted during a given period, as a space in which interviewers can share not only the analytical side of their interviewing experience, but also how it has affected them. Indeed, the discussion of the interviewer's emotional reaction to the interview is useful both for helping the interviewer to debrief and come to terms with their experience, but it can also give insight into the interviewee, and how they have formed their narrative to affect the listener in a

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certain way. As the “life story” interview is very much based on the relationship that develops between interviewee and interviewer, discussing how we affect each other emotionally is extremely useful.

If the interviewer feels that they need more support than that described above, they will also have the option of seeing a counselor one-on-one.