

Just Trauma-Informed Victim-centered Interviewing

Introduction [00:00:05] Now, this is recording, RTI International Center for Forensic Science presents Just Science.

Voiceover [00:00:19] Welcome to Just Science, a podcast for justice professionals and anyone interested in learning more about forensic science, innovative technology, current research, and actionable strategies to improve the criminal justice system. In episode three of our Research and Considerations for Sexual Assault Cases season, Just Science sat down with Natasha Alexenko, Jordan Satinsky, and Marya Simmons to discuss trauma informed, victim centered interviewing for sexual assault cases. A sexual assault victim's experiences with law enforcement and advocates can affect the way they approach future interactions with the criminal justice system. By understanding that each victim is unique and will respond differently, investigators and advocates can meet the needs of the survivors and increase the likelihood of moving the investigation forward. Natasha Alexenko, Jordan Satinsky, and Marya Simmons have been working together to develop and promote victim centered, trauma informed interviewing strategies for sexual assault cases. Listen along as they discuss supporting victims of sexual assault, improving case outcomes, and maintaining victim engagement by using trauma informed, victim centered approaches during the interview process in this episode of Just Science. This season is funded by the National Institute of Justice's Forensic Technology Center of Excellence. Some content in this podcast may be considered sensitive and may evoke emotional responses or may not be appropriate for younger audiences. Here's your host, Tyler Raible.

Tyler Raible [00:01:42] Hello and welcome to Just Science. I'm your host, Tyler Raible with the Forensic Technology Center of Excellence, a program of the National Institute of Justice. Today, our topic of discussion is trauma informed, victim centered interviewing. And to help with this discussion, I'm joined by founder and CEO of Shift in Notion Consulting, Marya Simmons; author, advocate and survivor, Natasha Alexenko; and Lieutenant Jordan Satinsky of the Montgomery County Police. It's great to see you.

Marya Simmons [00:02:07] Great to be here, Tyler. Thank you for having me.

Natasha Alexenko [00:02:09] Thanks for having me, Tyler.

Jordan Satinsky [00:02:11] Great to see you too, Tyler.

Tyler Raible [00:02:12] Wonderful. So you all are highly respected subject matter experts in the field of sexual assault response and you wear many hats. So let's start today's discussion with a brief introduction to what each of you do as professionals. Marya, let's start with you.

Marya Simmons [00:02:26] So my background has been in victim advocacy and the criminal justice field. I have three degrees in criminal justice, as well as being a victim advocate and supporter of victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, and also working with families of homicide victims for over 10 years now. Within my consulting business, I do training and technical assistance to professionals in the field who also support victims of sexual assault - such as law enforcement, prosecutors, and victim advocates, also working with medical professionals and mental health professionals as well - and trying to influence trauma informed practices, strengthening multidisciplinary team approaches, and

really strengthening support and engagement for victims as they engage within the process.

Tyler Raible [00:03:14] Excellent. Natasha, can you tell us a little bit about your background?

Natasha Alexenko [00:03:17] My name is Natasha Alexenko. I am a survivor of sexual assault. I was raped and robbed at gunpoint, and my kit sat on a shelf for nearly a decade unprocessed. I have since really been fortunate enough to be engaged with these amazing people I'm honored to be with today. And they've really helped me grow in my- as an advocate, as a survivor and as someone who is just really thrilled to be in this field where I can hear from other survivors across the country. And we can really kind of take our experiences with one another, engage with law enforcement, engage with advocates, and discuss better ways that we can work together as really a multidisciplinary team.

Tyler Raible [00:03:59] And speaking of law enforcement, last but not least, Jordan, can you tell us a little bit about your professional life?

Jordan Satinsky [00:04:06] My name is Jordan Satinsky. I'm really excited to be here. I'm a lieutenant currently with Montgomery County Police Department, which is just north of the District of Columbia in Maryland. I've been a law enforcement officer for a little over twenty-three years. Most of my career has been spent in either child sex crimes, adult sex crimes, or homicide. In my career in law enforcement, I've had the opportunity to work as a detective sergeant in domestic violence and sex assault and a detective lieutenant in those positions. I also worked with the SAKI Project for many years and both Marya and Natasha, getting across the importance of trauma informed interviewing and victim centered investigations to my law enforcement partners across the nation. So, again, Tyler, thank you very much for having us.

Tyler Raible [00:04:48] I'm especially excited because this particular group is how I kind of got immersed into the topic of sexual assault response reform. So having us all back together in the same room is, it's a homecoming in a sense. So I'm really thrilled that we could all find time. So the three of you, in addition to your day jobs, you've worked together conducting trainings that support sexual assault response reform. Can we talk a little bit of how that got started, and what it's like to work together as a multidisciplinary unit?

Jordan Satinsky [00:05:14] I actually came into this kind of somewhat by accident. One of the main heads found me at a conference and saw me talking and kind of brought me into this whole fold. Fast forward about a year later, I ended up doing a impromptu example of trauma informed interviewing on a stage in Arlington at the National SAKI Symposium. And it was myself, Marya, and Natasha. And unbeknownst to - well, they may have known, but I didn't - the woman who created it, Dr. Rebecca Campbell, happened to be hiding in the audience, watching us. And from there, this whole concept of us getting this message out was born, at least for me. And I didn't realize how important it was to make sure that law enforcement, victim advocates, survivors, and prosecutors - how important it was for them to have this information. I kind of was spoiled and thought everyone had it. And it wasn't until then that I realized maybe that's not the case. So that's where I came from in this arena.

Tyler Raible [00:06:08] So Natasha, how did you end up here?

Natasha Alexenko [00:06:09] So as Jordan just so clearly articulated, it was just kind of an improv situation. The three of us sat down and just really went through an interview process from law enforcement to a victim and then with the advocate standing by and we did different variations. So the individuals that were there joining us could really see the difference. And also, the difference in between the interaction, the difference between how a survivor communicates when they're in a situation where you have a law enforcement official that is aware of this victim centered, trauma informed approach to conducting the interview. And really a friendship blossomed afterwards, I really have to say I'm fortunate enough because if I knew these people outside of this world, I'd still adore them both. They're just amazing human beings and amazing professionals.

Tyler Raible [00:07:05] I love it. Marya, is there anything else you'd like to add?

Marya Simmons [00:07:08] Well, just like Jordan and Natasha had stated, my work actually started when I was working at the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor's Office. So from 2013 to 2018, I supported victims of the untested rape kit initiative and began to start doing presentations and really just networking and really increasing my ability to educate and spread awareness about the topics of trauma informed support and strengthening multidisciplinary teams. In that work, and also with my trainings, I truly saw the gaps, the lack of understanding of being trauma informed and really how to strengthen the approaches and engagement with victims and how to build rapport and how to build trust with them. And knowing that when we are working together as a team in that impactful collaboration that exists and that's present for victims is truly powerful and really keeping them engaged within the process. So I think that working with both Jordan and Natasha has been a great experience. I think that we have all grown with our knowledge and our skills and techniques to be able to facilitate that to others that are working with victims.

Tyler Raible [00:08:17] It's always such a treat talking with the three of you, because I can tell that you are friends. And Marya, you actually gave a great segue. You've all been working together on training to support the implementation of trauma informed, victim centered interviewing. Marya, can you tell us a little bit about what this actually is?

Marya Simmons [00:08:33] Treating victims with dignity and respect, keeping them included on their cases, meeting them where they are mentally, physically, and emotionally, and being able to support them through whatever stage that they're at when we do meet with them and engage with them. Being trauma informed is really about treating others the way we want to be treated, no matter what capacity that we're working in and really giving them a voice. Giving them a voice and empowering them to engage and participate in their cases, whatever way that they want to be able to participate and contribute. I think that for sexual assault victims that they may feel silenced, or they have been silenced. And I truly believe when all of the disciplines are working together to encourage them to engage in the process, in understanding how trauma looks different for every victim, individualization and supporting them can be less of a re-traumatizing and re-victimizing process for victims.

Tyler Raible [00:09:27] I do think it's fascinating that the trauma can look so different for so many people. So, Jordan, can you tell me a little bit about why a trauma informed, victim centered approach to interviewing is important?

Jordan Satinsky [00:09:40] Absolutely, Tyler. When I first started out as a adult sex crimes investigator, we also did homicide cases at the same time and unit I was in, and I was trained as a homicide investigator. Most of the people in my office were trained the

same way. And most of the people across the country were and this is - I'm not trying to say that my agency was terrible. Every, I think everyone in my profession did this at one point or another - we were trained to search out for the facts, follow, follow the facts, figure out what fits in to the crime category and move forward. Police, while we do interact with victims, our main tenant is the suspect. Working with others wasn't always our big strong point, such as people like Marya, it just wasn't a thing. Victim advocacy was looked at as it's there - if somebody wants to use it, that's great - but our responsibility was to the victim and the prosecutor, more or less the prosecutor in the case. So I'm not trying to say that we didn't care. There's tons of investigators out there that really, really do care. And I did, too. But we didn't have a good baseline outside of just the facts. Actually, several years ago when I was doing a case, I would record all my cases and a friend of mine who was a state's attorney and is now a judge asked me to look back and listen to one of my cases where I interviewed a victim. And in that interview, I came across as if I was basically issuing a traffic citation to this victim - that's how it kind of came across. It was very scripted, very robotic, because I couldn't figure out why I was losing my victims so readily all the time. They'd come in, I'd meet them, and then they'd disappear. Rarely did I have a victim - and this happened for a lot of folks in my office and around - where victims would just disappear after their first or second meeting with the investigator. So I listened to it - realized I sound pretty horrible and took a chance at trying something a little different and just being a little less robotic and a little bit more open. It took some practice, wasn't used to it, made lots of mistakes, but eventually I got better at it. Not great. Not perfect. There are tons of people out there that are a thousand times better than me at this, but I was able to kind of have that act of listening and kind of treat these cases in a much different manner where I was really looking out for the victim as much as I could, get as much information from them as I could in a very positive way for what they were willing to give and not pressure them into giving me anything, and utilize resources like folks like Marya, victim advocates that really showed our victims and our survivors, like Natasha that, hey, you know, law enforcement does care and I'll stay. Now do we still lose some survivors over time as we were doing our interviews and such? Absolutely. But it was much less. We actually had many more survivors engage in our criminal justice process once we started opening up our minds a little more. And we see that all across the country where investigators embrace this methodology and the willingness to collaborate. And it really does change how the department works with survivors, interacts with others in this community, and local victim advocacy groups and system advocates. And just how many of these suspects we actually end up putting in prison or holding accountable for their actions to try and make folks like Natasha as whole as possible.

Tyler Raible [00:12:45] It definitely sounds like there's a level of self-awareness that has to come with that. And Jordan, based on your description, it seems like it's kind of a relatively novel concept. But, Marya, it sounds like this is something that victim advocacy has supported for a long time. Is that correct?

Marya Simmons [00:12:59] Absolutely. I believe that that is what our mission and our passion is in supporting victims is to truly and effectively support them throughout the process. And Jordan made a lot of good points as you were talking, because it's about looking beyond what's just in a police report. It's about looking beyond how the victim responds or perceives themselves during initial contact or throughout their case. It's really, really not setting expectations on what to expect when engaging with the victim, because a lot of times you have to pivot. It takes time to be able to really engage with victims in order for them to trust you in order to engage in the process. But in addition to also what Jordan was saying, it's about the awareness and education and the training. There may not have been the same type of training from one police department to another. And so really just

be- how we are going out and how we're training on a national level about the importance of trauma informed practices. And working together as a team is truly critical in the work that we're doing.

Tyler Raible [00:13:59] I agree. Natasha, from a survivor perspective, do you see the same kind of value that Marya and Jordan have highlighted?

Natasha Alexenko [00:14:06] Yeah, absolutely. And they, just again, articulated everything so well. It's really vital not only to our recovery, but our ability to open up. I mean, certainly when you are just assaulted and just have recently gone through such a horrific experience, one of the things that you have an issue with is trust. So being able to develop a level of trust, a level of rapport is essential, you know, especially because allowing us to kind of feel as part of this team that's ultimately about public safety, ultimately about putting someone behind bars, ultimately about justice. And, you know, that's important. So it's important that we are in a situation where we feel relaxed, where we feel safe and where we feel inclined to share. I don't necessarily remember the details of the interview that took place in my case, but what I do remember is feeling safe. There was a level of authenticity in my case where the police officers that initially did the interview, I mean, they were just real. You can't really fake that authenticity, it just comes from within and that was just such an important part, it made me feel empowered in a sense, knowing that I was backed up, knowing that I was believed, knowing that I was treated as not just someone being brought in for a citation, but someone that had been through such a traumatic event and someone that was really bringing a great deal of value to the table. And ultimately, it really helped in my recovery. That part about being believed, that part about being trusted and being empowered really allowed me to kind of flourish as an individual and flourish ultimately to become fortunate enough to work on making it better for survivors across the country.

Tyler Raible [00:15:57] So this is kind of a three-part question. We're going to have to unpack this. But I want to know if the three of you think that implementing this type of interviewing has a direct impact on supporting victims of sexual assault or improving case outcomes or even just maintaining victim engagement. Natasha, let's start with you. Do you think that this type of interviewing has a direct impact on supporting victims?

Natasha Alexenko [00:16:19] Absolutely. You know, I think a fact alone that something is being taken in this direction just reminds survivors that we matter, that we are part of the criminal justice system, that we're part of that. I think it's essential. And, you know, going back to what Jordan says, which is always just so endearing and impressive to me and I've heard everybody say this on this team, and that is there's a lot of growth to be done. We're not there yet. I could be better. I mean, I look at the two of these amazing people and think, my gosh, how could you get better? And I think there's something in that, kind of being so humbled as to think they could improve further. And the reality is there is, there's always room for improvement because survivors are different. We're all different. We all come from different experiences, different places, and react to trauma in different ways. So I think that this is kind of an ever-evolving process, and we're learning from each other. I mean, how amazing is that? Three different disciplines, other disciplines as well, all coming to the table together and really making a difference.

Tyler Raible [00:17:23] I really love the multidisciplinary reinforcement of ideals here. Jordan, what kind of impact does this have on improving case outcomes?

Jordan Satinsky [00:17:30] Really the crux of any real criminal investigation, especially in the violent criminal investigations of person-to-person crimes, you need your victim. That victim is really going to be that person that can help authenticate not only that crime, but say potentially that that person sitting across them at that table in the courtroom that did this to them as best they can. And in these sexual assault cases, our victim is not only a central point as far as a witness, but 90 percent of the evidence comes from the victim, I would say, and that's just a Jordan Satinsky estimate. It's imperative that we as law enforcement recognize that and embrace the victim in a different manner, much as we would physical evidence in a property crime or any other type of high-end crime. We have a tendency - and this is not just law enforcement, this is human nature - we don't want to talk about sexual assault, in a lot of cases even believe it exists. And victim-blaming becomes very easy as a way to explain why these things happen. We have to step away from that mantra, because I'll tell you, I'm guilty of victim-blaming myself. You know, and it's easy, very easy to glom onto the negative and explain something away. This methodology is so important to keeping the victim engaged and moving through the criminal justice system as best we can. And if we get somebody who, a victim who is not willing at that point to be engaged in the system - and you know what? That's fine. Remember, this happened to them, not to you. And yeah, maybe this came- you came out at three, four o'clock in the morning to help this person, but at this moment in time, they're not interested in moving forward. OK, they'll come back potentially in the future. And we're seeing that now with the SAKI project. We have this case work where we're going back 10, 20, 30 years and we're engaging with victims. And I will tell you a lot of the times when I engage with victims in these, in the cold case project we were running, I got "Yeah, my detective the first time wasn't great." I will tell you, that is the very sanitized version of what I have heard. But moving forward 10, 12 years from now and I'm no longer here, someone else is in the seat doing something similar. They might be able to say, you know what, my detective at the time, they really did care. I just wasn't ready. And maybe they'll be able to engage. And I think that's the part you also have to realize is that we may be, some might say, be kicking the can down the road if you want to use that, I hate to kind of make that statement, I'm just trying to make it easy. But it's true. We're trying to say, it's OK. We're doing whatever you all want to do right now. And then if you want to reengage with us, you know, the door's open, and hopefully that makes them come back or allows them to come back in the future because of the team that was put together that was open-minded between myself, you know, law enforcement, victim advocacy, and the prosecutor's office is to help folks in Natasha's position move on and get something, get restorative justice the best they can.

Tyler Raible [00:20:01] Marya, is there an impact on victim engagement, maintaining them in the system, or trying to get more of the victims, the survivors to engage with the system?

Marya Simmons [00:20:12] I truly believe that there is an impact on engaging victims into the system, using these philosophies of being trauma informed and responsive. If you put into the component on initial contact engaging victims throughout the process, we're talking about one, we're ripping off the Band-Aid of them having to talk about what happened to them to multiple strangers. When you have a multidisciplinary team, everybody is at the table. They're sharing information. They're having frequent communication about cases. Everyone can be on the same page. So information sharing to victims is another component that has also strengthened as well through trauma informed practices because we're making sure that victims are informed about their cases. We're making sure they are having the ability to make informed decisions about engagement in their process. And then we're also giving them that, as Jordan said, that

restorative justice for them to be able to make a decision on how they want to seek justice. And so if we are coming from the angle of minimizing, getting rid of victim blaming or investigators and detectives minimizing the realities of a case because of challenges that they may see, we are in a position now to be able to say, OK, these are challenges to my investigation. However, if I truly build rapport and engage my victim, I can probably get the information that I need because I'm building trust with them and they'll be more open and comfortable with having those conversations and disclosing what happened to them. It's definitely a collective approach on how victims are treated and when they're treated again with dignity and respect, they are more willing to be able to engage in their cases.

Tyler Raible [00:21:44] It definitely seems like it's half the battle towards engagement, is that approach to dignity, that approach to respect that, as Jordan said, you know, actively listening. So I want to take a minute to give everyone a chance to talk about what people in their respective fields or area of expertise should know about trauma informed, victim centered interviewing. Jordan, I want to start with you. So what do people in your field need to know about this?

Jordan Satinsky [00:22:08] I think there's a few things. One, trauma informed interviewing is a little bit part-art, part-science, and it's much akin to the similar methodologies we would use for suspect interviewing minus the interrogation part. I think where sometimes we get hung up as investigators is that there are a lot of inconsistencies, especially between the first, second, and even sometimes third victim interview, depending on how you're structured. And we have a tendency, by the nature of our training, to zero in on those inconsistencies and make them the case versus remembering that these inconsistencies are most likely the victim's brain rebooting, kind of starting to give us more information. As an example, I was at a training not too long ago where a senior investigator from another agency actually said in front of about 50 or 60 people, "oh, yeah, sexual assault victims lie. Happens all the time." We know from studies that's not the case. If you were to look at incidents where officers are involved in traumatic incidents, they exhibit almost parallel responses physiologically and psychologically that rape victims, or excuse me, sexual assault victims do when trying to recall their event. Initially there's some information, then more information starts to come out. We don't look at them in a second way. We don't say that they're lying. We don't say that they're confabulating or changing their stories. They're just adding to it. I'm not sure why we can't add that same methodology to our sexual assault survivors. Now, I'm not going to sit here and say that people are a thousand percent truthful. That is not the case. That's why I say it's part-art, part-science. It's kind of watching your victim and learning their body language and listening to them and seeing where the evidence connects with what they're saying and building your criminal investigation from there. And there might be times where your criminal investigation, even using this method, isn't going to yield an arrest. But that's where Marya steps in and should have been with you hopefully all along and could really help that person get put back together mentally in a much different arena than you could have, only because that's not your area of expertise. So I think that's really, just kind of changing the way we look at things and understanding that this is, this is a new approach that can be applied to many, many different types of investigations. And it really is much like how we would set up a suspect interview where we are building that rapport, we're getting to know this person. We're listening. We just take out the interrogation part where we start to challenge what they're saying. It's really about just listening and comparing that to the evidence that you have.

Tyler Raible [00:24:26] I want to go down the rabbit hole a little bit here, Jordan. Obviously, there's some similarity between the normal suspect interview and a victim

centered interview. How would a trauma informed, victim centered interview differ from like a normal interview of a nonviolent crime?

Jordan Satinsky [00:24:40] In a victim of a nonviolent crime - if you're talking about like a property crime, Tyler, that's kind of what you're discussing - there are a lot of psychological things that a victim in a property crime would go through. But for the most part, you're dealing with tangible items, serialized items, and their things, right. In the area of a sexual assault, it's them - this is a person-to-person crime. You would never approach an aggravated assault victim in the same way you would a burglary victim. You're going to get different resources in both those cases. And we have to apply that to our sexual assault victims as well. You have an aggravated assault? Yes, they get certain resources. You have a sexual assault? They should get specialized resources too, just like a homicide victim does. The property crimes detective in most specialized agencies don't send out the burglary detective to handle the homicide or the sexual assault. They have people that are trained in this interviewing style and methodologies and evidence collection in order to really provide the best services to the victims that are available. Does that answer your question, Tyler?

Tyler Raible [00:25:35] Absolutely. There's a lot of tailoring, right. So, Natasha, what do you want to share with people in your area of expertise? What do they need to know about being trauma informed?

Natasha Alexenko [00:25:46] How things have changed. And, you know, I was assaulted in the 90s, and I've really seen a difference in the way these trainings manifest, and how things have really developed to where they are today and where they will continue to grow. And I think the proof in that is the fact that on this amazing group, they've invited a survivor of sexual assault. I mean, I don't have the amazing expertise Marya has. I was the director of a museum, but they still understood the value that a victim survivor has being brought to the table, that our voices matter in this. And it's important because again, once again, I think we all just come from different experiences, different places in our lives, and to recognize how valuable our input is in how we approach survivors, how we interview survivors, how we really empower them to become complaining witnesses that are ultimately part of this multidisciplinary team. It's amazing how much it's evolved.

Tyler Raible [00:26:53] Marya, in your area of expertise, what do people need to know about being trauma informed? Obviously, this is kind of the norm, but is there anything that maybe we haven't discussed already that needs to be brought to attention?

Marya Simmons [00:27:05] So I think it's really, truly about understanding that it takes time and patience. It takes time to be able to maybe break some of the barriers in victim engagement and that we may have to find creative ways on seeking engagement based on the victim's comfortability. Another aspect is that you can't do it alone. So as we were talking about multidisciplinary teams, it's important that we work together, especially with the victim advocates, that you do have systems-based advocates that work within the court systems and then you also have community-based advocates. They have different expectations and roles that they play on support for victims, but that they can still work together, collectively and collaboratively, in order to effectively provide support for victims. It's also looking at cases through different lenses - as we were talking about training and education and how cases were investigated years ago and how they are investigated now. So it's really about appreciating that there are different ways and skills and techniques to really enhance skills that were already there and changing the philosophies on how interviews are done today. It's also about paying attention to triggers as well. So when

you're engaging with victims, say, for instance, I work with victims who may have been identified as having a chemical dependency diagnosis within their report. As a victim advocate and working with the team, it's important to say, hey, we- these may be still triggers for a victim and how can we best support them throughout the process? That's allowing the victim to talk about what happened to them at their own pace, in their own narrative, not setting an expectation of what information that they're giving you could be true or false, and that's where the investigation comes in. So just being open and unbiased about the information, because a lot of victims may not remember all details all at one time. And so memories may come back at different times as you continue your engagement. So there should not be a gap in communication or a lack of engagement with the victim based on information that may not have been disclosed or considering them to be lying or withholding information. And so as a victim advocate, it can be a thankless job sometimes, right. You may not be able to meet every victim, keep them engaged in the process, but we all have to work together in order to try to make sure that we are empowering and supporting victims throughout the process.

Tyler Raible [00:29:18] In your experience, then, have you seen any evolution in the way that we're approaching these cases?

Marya Simmons [00:29:24] Absolutely. When I first started in victim advocacy years ago, I worked very closely within my local police department and was often called upon to assist with victim interviews. And so what I saw was this ideal and this drive for investigators to say, hey, I need your help, I need your expertise, because I really want to make sure that I am supporting this victim to the best of my ability. And so my mission and purpose was to stay engaged not only with my victim, but also with law enforcement and also with prosecutors and really influencing trauma informed practices of what that looked like - really showing them how victim advocacy can really strengthen their cases, also allowing them to be able to focus on their cases while I support a victim. And so seeing that, you can focus on your case and your investigation, and victim advocates are being able to support the victims effectively was one of the most impactful things that I was able to identify through my engagement with victims. And so when all disciplines can really, truly see the benefits of continued communication, then you can also appreciate the fact that the support for a victim comes from all angles, not just one discipline, and that we can all collectively work together to be able to support.

Tyler Raible [00:30:37] I mean, your answer definitely highlights the value of all being on the same team. So in terms of looking towards the future then of trauma informed, victim centered interviewing - Natasha, do you think this is the right trajectory? Are we on the right path from a survivor perspective?

Natasha Alexenko [00:30:53] We are absolutely on a wonderful path. And it's not just about what's written down in the textbook or what necessarily is out there, the research, which is, of course, very valuable. It's the people. It really is. It's the people that are being brought to the table, the various disciplines. But most of all, who they are as people - the humility, the altruism. And I really mean that. You know, it's not often that we get to walk around in life and just work with people who really care about what they're doing. And I'm aware that not everyone out there working with survivors may necessarily have the training or the thought process that this amazing group has. But these are the people that are moving, you know, moving the needle, and the trajectory is looking good. It's looking great. And I, I know everyone is really committed. I know everyone is very open. And I know that everybody is listening to survivors, which is really the most important part of all.

Tyler Raible [00:31:49] My question for the three of you is that it sounds like trauma informed, victim centered interviewing has a lot of benefit. There's a lot to offer there. But it also sounds like this is something that could require training. Is this a consideration to keep in mind? And I mean, this is open for discussion, but it seems to me like it's going to require a decent amount of training on all fronts.

Marya Simmons [00:32:10] So, Tyler, I believe that training is essential. It has to be onboarding training so that we're not putting investigators, victim advocates, and other professionals out in the field to engage with victim advocates without the proper training. And then it's also about ongoing training. It can't just be a checkbox on a yearly basis or a training. It has to be ongoing. It has to be an ongoing conversation within the workplace, within the disciplines, so that there is a unified approach and being able to systemically change how victims are treated throughout the process. This work is not textbook. We have to come out of just trying to practice verbatim what we read. It has to go into practice individually with victims. That's how we truly learn. And I'll speak from personal experiences that I've learned a lot through training and education, but I've learned more from working with my victims. I've learned more with working with the different disciplines that I've worked with and their techniques and how they engage with victims and providing me with information that I may not have even thought about before. And so really diving in and accepting others' expertise in this work and not believing that we can stand alone on just training. That can truly influence our ability to be able to reach victims individually through the process.

Jordan Satinsky [00:33:27] Yeah, I think everything Marya just said is totally correct. I mean, from onboarding, setting your expectations right off the bat is so, so important and having a designated, scripted-out training methodology to deploy on your folks when they get there so they really understand what they're in for. Working in this field isn't easy. It has a high burnout rate for a reason. Working everyday person-to-person crimes in traditionally understaffed detective squads is terrible. Like I'll tell you, when we first started our sex assault unit that was dedicated just to adults, we had four investigators and me as a sergeant for a little over, well, almost two years. They're up to six now. That tells you how far we've gone. And, you know, I've been, I have been promoted now out of that unit about three and a half, four years. So we're moving slowly towards a goal, but we're just not there yet. And the casework is there. I mean, you know, many agencies are looking at anywhere from 10 to 30 cases a month, depending on where you are and you split that up. These cases are not quick. They take a lot, a lot of work. So making sure that people understand what they're getting themselves into, understand the training, and know that not only do they have to just not, just like Marya said, train consistently, but do it consistently, because if you don't do it, you can't hone your skills. If you don't do it and you don't work with partners, you can't hone your skills. Those are all sorts of super, super important things.

Tyler Raible [00:34:42] What about the value in peer support? Is there anything that we could, that we could kind of unpack there a little bit? Marya, do you have any thoughts?

Marya Simmons [00:34:48] So I think that peer support comes with training. I think it's important for new investigators, new police officers and investigators to be able to shadow to be able to really see how their counterparts are really engaging with victims. And they're not just being thrown into the work. There's nothing more valuable than seeing it hands-on, but you also have to be able to put it into practice. And so when you're seeing best practice approaches and models in doing this work, then there could be a different philosophy on how you are approaching them if they didn't have that same support from

their peers. And so mentoring, showing what best practices look like, and being able to give constructive criticism and accepting constructive criticism if things don't necessarily go the way investigations are anticipated to go, but really supporting each other, because when there's one weak link, then it could trickle down to everyone. So everyone has to be on the same page and be able to support each other.

Tyler Raible [00:35:42] I mean, it's really hammering home the value of the multidisciplinary team, the value of being trauma informed, of being victim centered. Is there anything coming up you're excited about? Any future projects, events, resources, trainings, anything? What's coming down the pipeline?

Jordan Satinsky [00:35:57] I think actually getting back out there, Tyler, and seeing folks face-to-face and doing trainings about trauma informed interviewing and victim centered investigations to folks at agencies across the country, that's definitely a big deal. And I can't wait to get back out there in this post-COVID world and move forward and have more of that contact with folks to see how they're moving forward in their investigations and what they're taking from this. Because not only do we get out and get to teach this stuff and - I'm going to speak for Marya for a second, she can stop me if she wants - we all learn something for everywhere we go - good, bad, or indifferent. For the most part, it's actually really good - pick up things from all over the place, from a small agency in Oklahoma, just outside of Oklahoma City, to the largest agencies in the country like New York and L.A. So it's amazing to take that and get the chance to be that kind of ambassador and give it out to other agencies as well and pass it on and give those folks credit. So I'm excited to work with this team in person again, not in this venue of the Zoom world or Teams world, and really get out there and do some great work for everybody.

Tyler Raible [00:36:53] Marya, do you have anything coming up that you'd like to, that you'd like to share?

Marya Simmons [00:36:56] I will definitely piggyback on what Jordan said. It's about getting back out there and really meeting our audiences where they are. And I've said it before. I missed the aha moments and engagements with the audience and actually being able to do more interactive activities with them for them to put what they're learning into practice. And so in addition to doing some re-energizing for my own business, I'm definitely looking forward to being able to do that face-to-face again, because it's so important for you to be able to connect and network with everyone that's working on this issue in order for us to, again, to collectively make the changes that need to happen across the board and really spreading that awareness and education on why this work and the way that trauma informed approaches can truly just make all the difference in the world. We're dealing with people's lives. And so when we give them the ability to be able to thrive, although we are still working on what they've experienced, then we're giving them that voice and that empowerment that they need.

Tyler Raible [00:37:58] So, Natasha, do you have anything coming up that you're excited about?

Natasha Alexenko [00:38:01] Yes, of course. I'm so looking forward to projects in the future with the amazing people I've met on this, on this journey. I'm looking forward to doing new things, looking at things in a new perspective, getting additional input from survivors. I'm also really fortunate to be working with survivors across the globe right now, working in different countries to kind of look at how other countries view survivors, what trauma informed, victim centered interviewing looks for them, particularly. Every country

has different needs, different kind of variables going on and bringing a lot of what we're learning here in the United States to other countries and importantly, bringing back what perhaps they can bring here to America as well. I mean, it's great. It's like this whole idea of cross pollination, just taking the most brilliant minds and bringing all that knowledge together and really creating a better world for survivors across the globe.

Tyler Raible [00:39:02] Excellent. And I'm so sad that we're out of time. But are there any final thoughts that you'd like to share with our listeners before we wrap up today?

Natasha Alexenko [00:39:11] Again, I just really want to express, I'm just so humbled to be a part of this. I also recognize that I'm not necessarily the only voice of survivors. I do recognize that I am just one voice of many. And we all have different perspectives to bring to the table. And I'm really committed to listening, to do a lot more listening to other survivors and also important to open our eyes to the fact that there is hope. There is a light at the end of the tunnel and that light is really these amazing people that are working hard, that are believing us and that are trying to make things better for survivors everywhere.

Jordan Satinsky [00:39:51] I want to just echo something Natasha said. Yes, unfortunately, there are lots of survivors out there across the globe. And that's very, very unfortunate. But to have one come forward and - there are so few that I've worked with in the past that have been willing to do this kind of work - give a voice to the survivor, because that's not something that many people hear, outside of that three o'clock in the morning phone call from my profession, but to have someone come out and speak so powerfully about this situation and how it's not just you and how recognizing that there are other victims, it really does give a voice to the victims, to the survivor. And I think that's so, so very, very important. And I'm glad Natasha was here today, and Marya was here today to really help shape this narrative and let everyone know that we're here. We're really trying. And hopefully one day we'll all get this right. We really are working on it.

Marya Simmons [00:40:40] So my final thoughts would be to keep learning, to keep talking about this issue and really just supporting each other in understanding that we have work to do. This work is hard. It can be stressful sometimes, but imagine being on the other side of the fence and would you want that type of support? So I really think it's about putting the shoe on the other foot and really just saying this may be tiring today, but I know that if I make that one last phone call, if I can give that victim one more piece of information, if I just try a little bit harder on my case, then I can give them closure, healing, and resiliency. So I encourage everybody to take care of yourself, that this work is important, and you can't take care of others if you don't take care of yourself. I appreciate the opportunity, Tyler. It's great to be here with all of you. Thanks to Natasha and Jordan as well.

Tyler Raible [00:41:28] I'm always so impressed with the passion and the dedication that the three of you have to your work and to survivors and to improving the world. So I want to thank you a) for the work that you do, but also b) thank you, Marya, Natasha, Jordan, for sitting down with me and for sitting now Just Science to discuss trauma informed interviewing, to discuss victim centered interviewing. I think that this topic is incredibly important. So thank you all for joining us today.

Jordan Satinsky [00:41:55] Thank you for having us, Tyler.

Natasha Alexenko [00:41:56] Thank you so much.

Marya Simmons [00:41:57] It was a pleasure. Tyler, thank you.

Tyler Raible [00:41:59] And thank you all for listening today. If you enjoyed today's conversation, be sure to like and follow Just Science on your podcast platform of choice. For more information on today's topic and resources in the forensic field, visit forensiccoe.org. I'm Tyler Raible, and this has been another episode of Just Science.

Voiceover [00:42:16] Next week, Just Science sits down with Dr. Rachel Lovell and Mary Weston to discuss a recently published article detailing the case for an investigate-all approach to sexual assault cases. Opinions or points of views expressed in this podcast represent the consensus of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of its funding.