

The Investigator's Superpower

Using Trauma-Informed Techniques to Build Trust and Learn the Facts



Liz DeChellis
Partner & Director of
Title IX Services

September 26, 2025



SHARE OUT: What does
being “trauma-
informed” mean to you?



AGENDA



I. Trauma in Title IX Investigations

II. Title IX Investigative Interviews

III. Title IX Interviews: Trauma-Informed Approach

IV. Questions

Trauma in Title IX Investigations



Understanding Trauma

Traumatic Experience: Anything that exceeds our ability to cope

Trauma-Informed: Knowledge of how traumatic experiences might be impacting the person sitting across from us



Types of Trauma

- ⇒ Physical trauma
- ⇒ Medical trauma
- ⇒ Psychological trauma
- ⇒ Social or Collective trauma
- ⇒ Historical or Intergenerational trauma
- ⇒ Racial or Identity-based trauma
- ⇒ Immigration trauma
- ⇒ Developmental trauma
- ⇒ Ongoing, chronic, and enduring trauma
- ⇒ Secondary trauma or “compassion fatigue”



Reactions from Trauma



Reactions after a traumatic event
may vary significantly.

- ⇒ Anxiety
- ⇒ Fear
- ⇒ Shock
- ⇒ Numbness
- ⇒ Social Disconnection
- ⇒ Sleep Disturbances
- ⇒ Depression
- ⇒ Impact on Memory
- ⇒ Difficulty Focusing

Title IX Investigative Interviews



Investigative Interviews



Strong interview skills get:

- ⇒ More comprehensive responses
- ⇒ More specific evidence
- ⇒ More accurate information

Plan, Prepare & Practice

Unique Elements of Title IX Interviews



College-Aged
Witnesses



Parent, Attorney,
or Advisor
Present



May Have
Experienced
Trauma



Interview Question Types



Question Types to Avoid

-  **Leading**
"You do not know how many drinks she had, do you?"
-  **Compound**
"What time did you arrive, and how long were you there?"
-  **Assumed Facts or Priming**
"Was Sam mad about that or was she okay with it?"



Challenging Witness Situations

- ⇒ Emotional witness
- ⇒ Distracting location
- ⇒ Reluctant witness
- ⇒ Deflector
- ⇒ Culture of loyalty
- ⇒ Hostile witness
- ⇒ Gossiper
- ⇒ Talkative witness
- ⇒ Interference in process
- ⇒ Represented witness



Interviewing Tips

- ✓ Keep questions short, clear, and concise
- ✓ Ask only one question at a time
- ✓ Let the witness answer fully and listen to their answer
- ✓ Repeat back information to confirm and demonstrate
- ✓ Do not interrupt or suggest an answer
- ✓ Remain neutral in your questions and demeanor



Title IX Interviews: Trauma-Informed Approach



©2025 T9 Mastered

15

Six Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach



SAFETY



TRUSTWORTHINESS
& TRANSPARENCY



PEER
SUPPORT



COLLABORATION
& MUTUALITY



EMPOWERMENT
VOICE & CHOICE



CULTURAL,
HISTORICAL, &
GENDER ISSUES



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention –
Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response.

©2025 T9 Mastered

16

Impact of Trauma on Parties

- ⇒ Stress and trauma **interrupt** the memory process
- ⇒ Individuals are **reluctant** to recall experiences that evoke negative feelings and emotions
- ⇒ Traumatic stress can **interfere** with daily living



Preparing for a Trauma-Informed Interview



Trauma-Informed Approach: Interview Introductions

- ⇒ Ask how the interviewee is feeling
- ⇒ Clearly explain your role and the process
- ⇒ Develop a Motivational Statement
- ⇒ Be aware of your body language
- ⇒ Use same approach for both parties



Trauma-Informed Tone

EMPATHY

"I know this might be difficult to talk about."

COMPASSION

Give parties time and space

DIGNITY

Show an appropriate level of seriousness





Trauma-Informed Questioning

Begin with open-ended questions

⇒ “Can you tell me how the night began.”

Carefully worded follow-up

⇒ “Had you ever been alone together before?”

⇒ “Help me understand your thoughts about seeing them again.”

Elicit sensory memories

⇒ “What do you recall feeling, seeing, hearing?”

Exercise patience

⇒ Fragmented, disorganized, and inconsistent verbal accounts are common – do not force the witness to tell the story in the way you want



Reframing Interview Questions

How long were you at the party?



Can you talk to me about the party?

Tell me what the man was wearing?



Can you tell me more about the man?

Why did you go back to her apartment?



Help me understand what you thought about going back to her apartment?



Trust and Transparency During Interviews

Acknowledge the Difficult Process

"I know this is challenging to talk about."



Avoid Pushing for Details

"Who else was there?" vs.
"Can you tell me about other people you noticed or remembered?"

Don't Assume Ill-Intent

Don't assume the interviewee is purposefully evading the truth

©2025 T9 Mastered

23

QUESTIONS?



Liz DeChellis
lad@vmlawcorp.com

www.t9mastered.com

©2025 T9 Mastered