

## **The Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI) technique**

In the January 2016 issue of Police Chief magazine, there was an article entitled “*Using Science to Increase Effectiveness of Sexual Assault Investigations*”. Highlights of the article include the following:

Research indicates that sexual assault victims respond with more openness and more disclosure when they are relatively relaxed, when they trust the investigator, and when they do not feel threatened or accused by the investigator. “Victims who felt they were being treated with compassion and respect by investigators talk more openly about their experience; they disclosed more and withheld less.”

Research indicates that victims described very negative reactions to being questioned about whether or not they resisted or why they were with the perpetrator in the first place. While such questions are necessary, the timing of the questions, how they were framed, and whether they were asked in the context of a compassionate interview can be crucial.

Victims should never be treated as witnesses to their sexual assault; they did not witness the crime, they experienced it. Expressing empathy and compassion toward victims results in greater levels of helpful information

A traumatic experience instantly and radically changes the brain’s neurochemistry; including the brain region that involves memory formation and a person’s ability to recall events in context and sequence. Asking a rape victim to describe what happened and to “start from the beginning” may inadvertently push the victim to try to recall the sequence of events when they are actually unsure of that sequence.

Assuming that a rape victim will recall events exactly the same way each time they are interviewed may also be misplaced

Russell Strand, former special agent for the US Army Criminal Investigation Division, developed the **Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI)** technique. This interview technique attempts to address the neuroscience of human trauma. FETI borrows from critical incident stress debriefings, child forensic interviews, the neuroscience of trauma and memory. It is currently being taught to military and civilian investigators.

A key aspect of the FETI interview is to start the interview by acknowledging the victim’s trauma, emotional pain or difficult situation. From this initial empathetic and compassionate introduction, the interview asks what the victim is able to tell about their experience. The word “able” sends a message that relieves some of the stress and pressure feeling obligated to recall as many details as possible. Having the victims relate their experience, as opposed to asking them what happened, provides an opportunity for the victims to relate their physical and emotional experiences in meaningful and natural ways.

While useful in any trauma scenario, the application of the FETI technique for sexual assault interviews is particularly acute in light of how common it is for law enforcement to question the

veracity of a victim's experience when it seems to be inconsistent, lacking in peripheral details, and "full of holes." The FETI process focuses on the sensory aspects of the victim's experience, a focus that is consistent with the neuroscience of traumatic memories. The information provided by victims who are interviewed this way tends to be significantly more detailed than the information obtained in traditional who, what, why, when, where and how interviews.