AUTHORED BY INVESTIGATION EXPERTS,
BACKED BY 40 YEARS AND THOUSANDS OF INVESTIGATIONS

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Trauma Informed Interview Scenarios & Scripts

A Field Guide for HR Professionals Managing High-Stakes Investigations

"We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body."

-The Body Keeps the Score,
Bessel van der Kolk

Overview

Even with training and preparation, interviews don't always go according to plan.

Participants may cry, shut down, become frustrated, or reveal distressing experiences that require quick, careful adaptation.

These scenarios are based on the lived experiences of our team at Barker Hutchinson - drawn from hundreds of investigations in complex, emotionally charged environments.

You'll find examples of common moments when interviews go "off script," along with trauma-informed responses and sample language you can use in real time.

Scenario 1: The Complainant Breaks Down

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

During the interview, the complainant becomes visibly upset and says, *"I should've just kept quiet. This is making it worse."*

Trauma Informed Approach

Acknowledge the emotion without assuming what it means or rushing to fix it.

Offer choice and control.
Create psychological safety by allowing the participant to decide how to proceed.

Get curious.
Ask open-ended questions that invite deeper understanding, without pressure

Sample Scripts

"I can see this is difficult to talk about. I appreciate you taking the time to share this information with me. Would it help to take a break, or would you prefer to continue at your own pace?"

"You mentioned this feels like it's making things worse. Can you share a bit more about what's coming up for you right now? Is there anything I can do to make this process easier for you?"

Scenario 2: The Complainant Insists on Anonymity

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

The complainant says, *"I'll only participate if the respondent doesn't know it was me who made the complaint."*

Trauma Informed Approach

Get curious. Gently ask why anonymity matters to them. This builds rapport and may uncover manageable concerns.

Educate with empathy. Transparently explain any procedural limitations while validating their concern.

Explore safety planning. Discuss steps the organization can take to mitigate risk and reassure the participant.

Sample Scripts

"I want to be transparent with you. In order to ensure a fair process, the respondent needs to know the details of the allegations —including who made them. That said, your safety and well-being are our priority. Let's discuss safety planning and options that are available to you."

"Thank you for sharing your concern. Can you tell me a bit more about what specifically worries you about the respondent knowing you made the complaint?"

Scenario 3: The Respondent Wants to Submit a Written Statement Only

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

The respondent says, *"I'd rather just send you a statement instead of doing an interview."*

Trauma Informed Approach

Be curious. Understand the underlying discomfort before denying the request outright.

Educate with empathy. Explain why interviews matter for fairness and accuracy.

Explore flexibility. Accommodate when possible without compromising investigative integrity.

Sample Scripts

"Thanks for letting me know that's your preference. Can you tell me more about why you'd rather provide a statement instead of an interview?"

"We do our best to accommodate everyone's needs where we can. That said, part of my role is to ensure I have your full response and that may require me to ask clarifying questions, which isn't possible with a written statement alone. Let's see if there's a way to make the interview process more comfortable for you."

Scenario 4: The Complainant is Angry About Delays

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

The complainant says, *"It's been weeks since my interview and this still isn't over. I knew HR wouldn't take this seriously."*

Trauma Informed Approach

Acknowledge the frustration without defensiveness.

Empathize before educating.

Rebuild trust by clarifying the process and showing up consistently moving forward.

Sample Scripts

"I hear how frustrating this delay has been and appreciate you want this investigation done as quickly as possible. I want that too. There were a few steps that have delayed the timeline, but please know this investigation remains my priority and I am working to complete it as soon as possible."

"I want you to know that the length of time this is taking isn't a reflection of how seriously [Company's name] takes your concerns. Going forward, I'm happy to keep you updated if you'd like. While I can't share the specific steps I'm taking in the investigation I can let you know the general status and answer any questions you might have."

Scenario 5: The Complainant is Distracted or Disengaged

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

The complainant keeps checking their phone, avoids eye contact, or seems emotionally shut down.

Trauma Informed Approach

Don't take it personally. Respond with curiosity, not judgement.

Gently check in. Offer a break, or validate what they're feeling.

Respect boundaries if it's a coping mechanism.

Sample Scripts

"I noticed you've been checking your phone a few times. Is everything okay, or would a short break be helpful?"

"I just want to check in on how you're finding this process. I want to make sure you feel okay continuing."

Scenario 6: The Complainant Becomes Emotionally Overwhelmed

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

The participant starts crying or becomes visibly distressed during the interview.

Trauma Informed Approach

Pause and prioritize care.

Give choice.
Don't push to continue.

Use a calm tone and supportive language.

Sample Scripts

"I appreciate this might be difficult to speak about. Would you like to pause for a break, or is there anything I can do to make the process more comfortable?"

"I appreciate you sharing this information with me. We can go at whatever pace feels manageable for you."

Scenario 7: Respondent is on Indefinite Leave and Unavailable for Interview

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

A key party to the investigation is on leave and unable or unwilling to participate in an interview.

Trauma Informed Approach

Document the delay clearly.

Assess impact on complainant and whether updates should be shared.

Explore whether there are any accommodations that would allow the Respondent to participate.

Sample Script (to Complainant):

"I want to keep you informed. The person named in the complaint is currently on a leave, which may delay their participation (if you can share this information). If you'd like, I can continue to share general updates on timing—just let me know what works best for you."

Sample Script (internally):

"Given the indefinite nature of the leave, I'd like to explore whether there are any accommodations that would make it easier for you to participate in this process. Are you open to that conversation?"

Scenario 8: Complainant Wants to Withdraw Their Complaint

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

The participant says, *"I'm not sure I want to go through with this anymore."*

Trauma Informed Approach

Get curious. Don't pressure or persuade.

Explore concerns and clarify misconceptions.

Maintain neutrality and help them make an informed decision.

Sample Scripts

"Thank you for letting me know. Would you be willing to share what's making you feel that way? That might help us explore any accommodations or supports that could make this feel more manageable."

"Would it be helpful if I shared a bit more information about the process? I just want to make sure any decision you make is fully informed and that you know what to expect."

Scenario 9: Interviewee is Embarrassed and Apologizes

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

The participant says, *"I'm sorry for taking up your time"* or *"This is probably silly anyway."*

Trauma Informed Approach

Affirm the importance of their voice.

Frame participation as part of due process.

Let them know you're there to listen.

Sample Scripts

"There's absolutely no need to apologize. Your perspective is important, and I want to be sure I understand it clearly."

"I want you to know your concerns are taken seriously. I'm here to listen, and we'll go at whatever pace works for you."

Scenario 10: Information is Fragmented or Hard to Follow

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVIEW SCENARIOS & SCRIPTS

What Happens

The participant shares a disjointed narrative due to trauma, anxiety, or memory impairment.

Trauma Informed Approach

Let them finish without interruption.

Take notes and ask gentle follow-ups later.

Remain neutral in body language and tone.

Sample Scripts

"Thank you for sharing that. There's a lot there, and I want to make sure I understand everything clearly. Would it be okay if I ask a few clarifying questions to ensure I've captured everything accurately?"

"Take your time. I'm here to work with you, and we can go at whatever pace and in whatever order you need."

A Personal Note from Co-CEOs, Greg & Laura Hutchinson

At Barker Hutchinson, we understand that workplace investigations are about more than just uncovering facts—they're about creating a process where everyone involved feels respected, heard, and safe.

The way you approach each intercation sets the tone, and as the saying goes,
"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

This guide is a starting point to help you build a process that embodies empathy and professionalism.

But every organization has its unique challenges, and implementing trauma-informed practices often requires tailored solutions. That's why I want to personally invite you to take the next step.

I look forward to partnering with you to create a stronger, safer, and more empathetic investigation process.

Warm regards,

~ Greg & Laura Hutchinson

When You're Ready, Here are Two Ways Barker Hutchinson Can Help...

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