

ID GoLive:

Bridging the Communication Gap Between Covert Professionals and Law Enforcement



Beyond
Google:
Why PI's
Should Explore
the Dark Web

AI Is
Changing
Private
Investigator
Marketing

Title IX and
Employee
Conduct
in K-12
Settings

Nationwide
Death
Investigations:
Criminal and
Civil Aspects

Fundamental
Operations
of a
PI
Agency

DEPARTMENTS

BACKGROUNDING

- 22** THE MOST COMMON FCRA LITIGATION CLAIMS: WHAT HR LEADERS AND BACKGROUND SCREENERS NEED TO KNOW
By Robert Capwell

BUSINESS

- 24** SHARPENING SKILLS THROUGH TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR INVESTIGATORS
By Amber Schroader

BUSINESS-TAX

- 26** PROPER HELP FOR TROUBLED BUSINESSES
By Mark E. Battersby

SOCIAL MEDIA

- 28** THE GREAT SHIFT
By Amanda Brown

PI HISTORY

- 30** THE BOUNTY NOT PAID
By Daniel Demers

IMPACT ANALYSIS

- 32** TRAFFIC CRASH INVESTIGATIONS
By Daniel Jones

VERACITY FILES

- 35** TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVIEWING FOR PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS
By Jody O'Guinn

PI 101

- 38** THE CRIMINAL DEFENSE INVESTIGATOR'S STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO CONDUCTING POST CONVICTION RELIEF APPEAL INVESTIGATIONS (Part I)
By Malik Mubashshir

ALL THINGS SURVEILLANCE

- 40** TOOL IN TOOLBOX
By Eric DeVan

CYBERSLEUTHING

- 42** TO DATA CULL OR NOT DATA CULL
By Robert B. Fried and Craig Treese

- 44** URGENT CALLOUT TO ARM CHAIR DETECTIVES – HALT YOUR DANGEROUS PUBLIC ACCUSATIONS OF INNOCENT PERSONS!
By Christopher Salgado

PI PERSPECTIVES

- 46** LEVERAGING GOVERNMENTAL INVESTIGATIVE METHODOLOGIES IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR (PART I)
By John Dale Hartman

TSCM

- 48** HIDDEN CAMERAS AND PERSONAL SAFETY: PRACTICAL AWARENESS TIPS FOR WOMEN AND FAMILIES
By Tim O'Rourke

THE PI AND FUGITIVE RECOVERY

- 50** THE STRATEGIC VALUE OF INTEGRATING BAIL ENFORCEMENT AGENTS INTO COMPLEX PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS
By Patrick Collis

EXECUTIVE PROTECTION

- 52** THE OVERLOOKED ADVANTAGE IN PERSONAL PROTECTION
By R. Preston Hocker

PROCESS SERVING

- 54** A DEFENDANT'S WORST ENEMY
By Kevin Toal

MARKETING

- 56** ARE YOU MAKING THESE 3 FATAL TRUST MISTAKES?
By Catherine Flowers

FINANCIAL

- 58** THE RISING THREAT OF AUTHORIZED PUSH PAYMENT (APP) SCAMS: AND RECOVERY STRATEGIES IN MODERN PAYMENT SYSTEMS (PART 2)
By Rodney Gagnon

NCISS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

- 65** NCISS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE
By Rich Robertson

IN EVERY ISSUE

Public Records Update	57
Discover NALI.....	61-63
PI Resources.....	68-69
PI Seminars & Conference Calendar	71

TRAUMA-INFORMED INTERVIEWING FOR PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

BY **JODY O'GUINN**, CEO AND PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
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Interviewing is the backbone of private investigation work. Whether the case involves workplace harassment, discrimination, sexual misconduct, domestic violence, catastrophic injury, or civil litigation, the quality of an investigator's interview can dictate the trajectory of an entire case. Yet one of the most overlooked skillsets in the private investigation profession is trauma-informed interviewing, an approach that recognizes how trauma affects memory, communication, behavior, and emotional response. We can no longer interview victims of extreme trauma with the classic Joe Friday approach from *Dragnet*, the mantra of "Just the facts."

For many investigators, trauma-informed interviewing might sound like a psychological specialty reserved for clinical professionals, victim-advocacy units, or law-enforcement Special Victims Unit (SVU) detectives. In reality, private investigators frequently interact with individuals experiencing trauma, often without the support systems or legal protections that come with criminal-justice investigations. A complainant in a workplace sexual-harassment investigation, for example, may be simultaneously juggling job security concerns, fear of retaliation, embarrassment, and the psychological effects of trauma-related stress. If the investigator does not understand how trauma manifests, they risk unintentionally damaging rapport, contaminating memory, or producing testimony that falls apart under legal scrutiny.

In civil investigations, the objective is not to extract a confession or pressure a narrative; it is to uncover accurate, usable information. A trauma-informed approach strengthens that mission.

Understanding Trauma and Memory

Trauma fundamentally changes how the brain processes and stores information. Research has repeatedly shown that traumatic incidents are encoded differently in memory and are often fragmented, nonlinear, or sensory-based rather than chronological. During a traumatic event, the brain prioritizes survival over organization, so victims may initially struggle to produce a coherent timeline or recall certain details later as memory consolidates.

For investigators accustomed to linear storytelling, this can be frustrating. However, assuming deception based on scattered recall



is a critical mistake. Trauma-affected victims are not unreliable; they simply recall traumatic events differently.

Statements such as: "I'm sorry, I'm trying to remember," "It's all mixed up," or "I don't know why I remember that part but not others," are common and normal. Pushing aggressively for just the facts in a sequential order early in the interview can inadvertently increase stress, reduce cognitive clarity, and shut the witness down.

A trauma-informed interviewer recognizes that memory can be accessed more effectively through open-ended, sensory-based, and context-grounded questioning, rather than pressure or confrontation.

Rapport: The Foundation of a Trauma-Informed Interview

Rapport in trauma cases is not about casual friendliness; it is about creating psychological safety. When a person feels physically and emotionally safe, the brain shifts from a defensive state to a receptive one, improving recall and communication.

Key strategies include:

- Explaining the process upfront. Let the interviewee know what will happen, why you are asking questions, and how the information will be used.
- Giving control where possible. Providing options to the interviewee, such as when to take breaks, when to pause recordings, or how to arrange seating, helps reduce stress.
- Normalizing emotional reactions. Saying, "It's okay if you need a moment," or "Many people struggle to discuss events like this," communicates empathy and respect rather than judgment.
- Avoid surprise questions early. Begin with non-threatening, non-accusatory, and open-ended questions before moving to specifics.

Many investigators make the mistake of believing that building rapport is wasted time. It's not, it is an investigative investment that yields clearer, legally prudent, and more accurate information.

Avoiding Leading, Suggestive, or Contaminating Questions

For private investigators, especially those transitioning from law-enforcement backgrounds, interrogation-style questioning can feel natural. However, civil investigations involving trauma require a different mindset, one that those with a prior law enforcement background might not be accustomed to. Posing leading questions, forcing timelines, and adopting accusatory tones can confuse memory, introduce false details, and irreparably damage both your credibility and your victim's credibility.

When posing questions, instead of saying, "So, you're telling me he grabbed you first, right?" you might consider asking, "Tell me what happened next." Instead of asking, "Are you sure it wasn't earlier in the evening?" you might consider asking, "What makes you think it occurred around that time?"

The goal is not to force or shape a narrative; it is to allow the witness to recall without influence. The courtroom consequences of a contaminated interview can be devastating. Defense counsel will have laser focus on inconsistencies, which may imply to a jury that the statement has been fabricated or coached. A trauma-informed approach protects the truth and the reputations of the victim and the investigator.

Cognitive Interviewing: A Compatible Enhancement

One of the most effective tools in trauma-informed interviewing is the cognitive-interview model. The Cognitive Interviewing Model is a research-based investigative interviewing technique designed to improve the accuracy and quantity of information

recalled by victims and witnesses. It helps people mentally recreate the context of an event, such as sights, sounds, emotions, and surroundings, so memory retrieval is more accurate and complete.

Key strategies include reinstating the original context, recalling events in different orders, changing perspectives, and encouraging uninterrupted narrative recall. This method reduces leading questions, minimizes contamination of memory, and is especially effective when interviewing trauma-impacted individuals, enhancing both reliability and detail without unintentional coercion. It minimizes pressure and maximizes recall by reinstating mental context ("What could you hear, smell, or feel at that moment?") and by tapping into sensory memory through reverse-order storytelling and uninterrupted narrative recall.

These tools work exceptionally well in trauma-impacted memory because they circumvent anxiety and access deeper information pathways. Cognitive interviewing also aligns well with evidentiary defensibility, as nothing is coerced or suggested.

Managing the Interview Environment

The interview environment can dramatically affect a trauma survivor's willingness to participate and ability to recall information. Whenever possible, interviews should occur in a quiet, comfortable, neutral, and private setting. Seating should be arranged to be non-confrontational, and recording procedures must be explained transparently. During the interview, investigators should monitor the victim for:

- Body language that may indicate distress
- Signs of any rapid breathing or dissociation
- The need for breaks
- Any escalation of emotion or withdrawal

When the piece is missing – Calabash finds it

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The objective is not to push through distress but to support clarity. A poorly managed environment can undermine the victim's willingness to continue just as easily as a hostile question.

Professional Neutrality Without Emotional Detachment

Don't worry, trauma-informed interviewing does not mean investigators need to become therapists. But it does mean investigators need to recognize that empathy improves information flow. Professional neutrality allows the investigator to remain objective while acknowledging the human reality of the moment.

Making a simple statement such as "Thank you for sharing that, I know it's difficult," or "You're doing fine, take your time," reinforces trust, demonstrates empathy, and helps keep communication open and flowing freely.

Why This Matters for Private Investigators

Civil investigations frequently escalate to litigation, corporate accountability, media exposure, or government inquiry. If a PI's interview technique creates the appearance of bias, coercion, or memory contamination, the entire investigation may collapse. Conversely, a trauma-informed approach enhances credibility, protects clients, and supports ethically sound investigative practices.

Attorneys increasingly expect trauma-aware interviewing, especially in cases involving discrimination, HR complaints, or violence. Agencies that adopt this method distinguish themselves as progressive, professional, and defensible.

Private investigators who master trauma-informed interviewing

position themselves as experts, not interrogators, but skilled information collectors capable of navigating the most sensitive cases.

Conclusion

Trauma-informed interviewing is more than a compassionate approach; it is a strategic one. Understanding trauma response, protecting witness dignity, and avoiding coercive or suggestive tactics produce cleaner statements, more substantial evidence, and greater legal defensibility. In a profession where reputations are built on integrity and results, trauma-informed interviewing is not optional; it is essential.

Private investigators have a responsibility not just to gather facts, but to do so in a way that honors the people who trust us with their stories. When done correctly, trauma-informed interviewing strengthens investigations, elevates professional standards, and ultimately delivers unmistakable truth. **PI**



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