

The Ethical Dance: Dealing with traumatized sources

Empathize. Don't fake it. Be genuine and gentle and understand a victim's situation. Sincerity is incredibly important. "A lot of it is common sense," the Chicago Tribune's David Heinzmann said. "In any circumstance, if you had to go introduce yourself to someone who is in the midst of tragedy, you just do it with as much decency and humility as you can."

Respect a victim's decision. Victims, suspects, witnesses and their families can have many reasons to talk or not talk to a reporter after a crime. Respect their decision to talk – and to refuse to talk – to you. But keep in mind that, for some, talking is therapeutic, and it allows them to get their side of the story out. "It's remarkable to me how willing a lot of victims' families are to talk," Heinzmann said. "And that's in really impoverished neighborhoods, where violence is way, way too routine and everybody knows someone who's been murdered, and nearly everyone's got a family member who's been murdered." The Salt Lake Tribune's Lisa Rosetta adds: "Be very sincere. Give them the option of not talking to you... Surprisingly, most people will take advantage of [talking to you]. They want to talk to someone about what happened to them. In some ways, it's cathartic. If they say they don't want to talk to you, you have to respect their privacy."

Be quiet. Don't schmooze. Don't interrupt. "You don't have to chat them up too much," Rosetta said. "Just let them tell their story."

Keep your notebook in your pocket – and be honest. "I usually make sure my notebook is in my pocket and not in my hand and my pen is not in my hand," Heinzmann said. "I just say who I am, and that I'm writing a story about what happened and I would like to talk to them about whoever it is – a son, a grandson – and I would like to know more about that person. Maybe that's the key – to tell them that you're going to write a story about what happened, and for it to be a really complete and accurate picture, you want to hear what they have to say about that person."

Respect the victims. Remember, everyone involved in your reporting is a human being. In Chicago, much of David Heinzman's coverage deals with gang- and drug-related crime. "A lot of times, murder victims are people with a lot of criminal history," Heinzmann said. "That doesn't mean you dismiss them as just a bunch of drug dealers killing each other... Those young guys who are dying have stories worth hearing." Understand the importance of your work. "It's kind of a privilege for me to see [victims' willingness to talk]," Heinzmann said, "to go out and see people who really have nothing, have no money and have really fractured families... and their willingness to talk to me and tell me their stories, that's sort of enriching for me."

Trust your gut. Sometimes victims or their families will ask for advice. Veteran crime reporters, especially, tend to know a great deal about the justice system – their beat. Each reporter has his or her own personal guidelines for when a relationship with a victim is too close. Some offer advice. Others shy away from it. Opinions may vary, but the police reporters who contributed to this project agreed: trust your instincts. "I deal with people whose situations are pretty dire... and I will offer a lot of advice. I'll tell them agencies that they can go to or lawyers that can help them," said the Free Press' Jack Kresnak. "I'm a human being first... This is a great job for dealing with real life, and if I can help somebody, [then I will]."