



NMVC

National Mass Violence Center

Providing Resources to Victims,
Survivors, & Those Who Serve Them

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Preparing for News Media Interviews

Thorough preparation for media interviews can help ensure the quality of the interaction and the accuracy of information that is shared. It can also reduce the potential for overwhelming distress. Victim Service Professionals (VSPs) are available to help you prepare in advance for media interviews and provide guidance about how to maintain control and personal autonomy throughout the interview process.

Establish Personal Goals for the Media Interview

The most important part of preparation is establishing your goals for the interview:

- ⇒ What do you want to say?
- ⇒ Are there specific messages or points you want to convey?
- ⇒ What do you want the reading, listening or viewing audience to know about your experience?
- ⇒ Are there any specific topics you do not want to discuss?



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Understand “Editing”

It’s important for you to understand that the reporter to whom you speak with is only one person among several who are responsible for editing an article or producing a news broadcast. It is an on-going process that begins when a story is assigned and ends only when it is published or broadcast.

Editing can be done by a reporter, editor, copy editor, producer, or news director. Editing helps make sure that a story is accurate, clear, understandable, and objective. It also helps to ensure space and time constraints do not affect the quality, or factual information, in a story. Editing focuses on accuracy, style, spelling and grammar, the length of the article or broadcast, and lack of bias.

When you understand the editing process, you will also understand how important it is to:

- ⇒ **Be concise.** Longer statements are more likely to be edited than those that are brief and to the point.
- ⇒ **Be accurate.** Talk about what you know and avoid responding to hypothetical questions.
- ⇒ **Speak plainly.** Think about the interview as a “conversation” and speak in a conversational manner.



Learn About How the News Media Operates

- ⇒ **Learn all you can about the media and interview process.** A VSP can educate you about the news media, their goals and objectives. The more you understand the interview process, the better your interview will be.
- ⇒ **Learn how the media operates.** While you will deal directly with a reporter, there are also editors, managing editors, photographers, and headline writers who all contribute to print stories; and editors, news directors, producers, and camera operators who contribute to broadcast stories. Figures 1 and 2 depict the “hierarchy” of print (newspaper and magazine) and broadcast (television) news media.
- ⇒ **Fact Checkers.** New media outlets have people they employ called “fact checkers.” Their function is to clarify or correct any misleading or inaccurate statements before the story is finalized. You may be called by someone in this position and it is important that you listen carefully and clarify any comments you made during the interview that may have been incorrectly interpreted.





Identify and Address Logistics of the Interview

- ⇒ **Learn what you can about the person conducting the interview.** A VSP or support person can provide you with the journalist's name, media affiliation, type of publication or radio/television station, its audience, and the style of interviewing. You can also use Internet search engines to find past stories done by the journalists, both print and broadcast.
- ⇒ **Determine if you want a support person to accompany you.** As noted earlier, it can be helpful to have a family member, friend or VSP with you to provide support to help address and reduce any stress reactions you may have. If you choose to have a support person, inform the reporter ahead of time.
- ⇒ **Confirm the logistics of the interview in advance.** You will want to know the date, time, location, length of interview, and name of the reporter. Plan to arrive at least 30 minutes in advance of the interview. For a telephone interview, or television interview conducted remotely from the studio, make sure you have the reporter's telephone number in case of technical or other difficulties.
- ⇒ **Determine the format of the interview.** Is it live or taped? In-person, over the telephone, or using an on-line video application? For national television networks, where will the interview take place (i.e., your home, a local television studio), and where will the interviewer be located? What is the anticipated length of the interview? For broadcast media, are there other guests or will you be the only interviewee?
- ⇒ **Determine the scope of the topics to be discussed.** Your support person or VSP can find out what the reporter wants to talk about and provide you with a general framework for the interview (while recognizing that other topics may be discussed).
- ⇒ **Determine if there will be a pre-interview.** Broadcast media often require a pre-interview or an informal discussion with a producer before the on-camera or on-air interview. It's an opportunity to discuss and confirm basic facts and details, obtain correct spelling of names, establish ground rules, and answer any questions you may have. When conducted close to the time of the interview, it can also be an opportunity to warm up and get comfortable prior to the actual interview. Note, however, that questions may be asked during the interview that was not discussed during the preinterview.
- ⇒ **Negotiate ground rules, if any.** Decide if you would like to establish any "ground rules" for interviews. This could include whether you can ask questions of the journalist to clarify any issues or concerns. You might want to specify the length of the interview, the presence and role of a support person, topics that are "off limits," and your ability to end the interview at any time. It's important to know that journalists may also have ground rules that they want honored. Reporters have conventions such as "off the record" and "only on background" that dictate what they can and cannot use in their stories. However, this is an area where confusion and errors can occur. Crime victims should operate under the assumption that anything they say can be included in the story.
- ⇒ **Determine any personal privacy concerns.** Do you want to be interviewed without being identified by name or being photographed or filmed? How will the person speaking on behalf of a child victim be identified so that the child is not directly or indirectly identified? Your support person or VSP can convey these concerns to the interviewer.



Identify and Address Logistics of the Interview (continued...)

- ⇒ **Discuss taping the interview for your own records.** You can advise the interviewer that you will be audio taping or videotaping the interview via Smart Phone or recorder. This provides you with documentation of the complete, unedited interview, and can also help avoid any inaccuracies in what is reported.
- ⇒ **Provide information and context to the reporter.** He or she will likely want to know specific details about where you were during the MVI; what it was like being in such a horrific environment; the impact it has had upon you and your family; and how you are doing at the time of the interview. Remember, you do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or that you do not wish to answer!
- ⇒ **Rehearse in advance of the interview.** Use the questions identified above to discuss possible answers. Role playing with your support person or VSP can help you gain mastery of the process. Practice and constructive feedback can help you feel more confident and concise in your responses to interview questions.
- ⇒ **Carefully review “[Media Guidelines for Homicide Family Survivors](#)”.** This will help increase your confidence and reduce opportunities for stress.

The NMVRC is grateful to victim advocate Anne Seymour and to both Bruce Shapiro and Elana Newman of the DART Center for Journalism & Trauma for their collaboration on this tip sheet.



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