

Being an Effective Interviewer

Here's a checklist for being an effective interviewer when collecting personal stories:

1. Create a Safe and Trusting Environment

- **Why:** Establishing trust is crucial for encouraging vulnerability. The interviewee needs to feel safe to share their experiences.
- **How:** Start with small talk to build rapport, express genuine interest, ensure confidentiality, and clarify the purpose of the interview.

2. Hold Space Without Judgment

- **Why:** The interviewee must feel heard and validated, which requires a non-judgmental attitude.
- **How:** Maintain neutral body language, avoid interrupting, and listen actively without interjecting your own opinions.

3. Use Open-Ended Questions

- **Why:** Open-ended questions allow the interviewee to explore their thoughts and feelings more deeply, leading to richer, more detailed responses.
- **How:** Instead of asking "Did that make you sad?" ask "How did that experience affect you?"

4. Keep Comments and Interjections Minimal

- **Why:** Frequent interjections can disrupt the interviewee's thought process and shift the focus away from their story.
- **How:** Resist the urge to fill silence with comments or relate with your own stories. Focus on the interviewee's narrative.

5. Be Comfortable with Silence

- **Why:** Silence can be a powerful tool, giving the interviewee time to reflect and continue with deeper thoughts.
- **How:** When there's a pause, allow it to linger. The interviewee might be processing their thoughts, and the silence can encourage them to continue sharing.

6. Avoid Telling Relating Stories

- **Why:** Sharing your own experiences can unintentionally shift the focus from the interviewee and may make them feel like they need to comfort or validate you.
- **How:** Even if you relate to the story, keep your experiences to yourself and continue to focus on their narrative.

7. Use Reflective Listening

- **Why:** Reflecting back what the interviewee has said shows that you're listening and encourages them to elaborate.
- **How:** Paraphrase or summarize what they've shared to confirm understanding, e.g., "It sounds like you felt very isolated during that time."

8. Acknowledge Their Courage

- **Why:** Acknowledging the bravery it takes to share personal or traumatic experiences can reinforce the interviewee's sense of safety and validation.
- **How:** Simple statements like "Thank you for sharing that" or "I appreciate your openness" can be powerful.

9. Mind Your Body Language

- **Why:** Non-verbal cues can either make the interviewee feel safe or more anxious.
- **How:** Maintain eye contact, nod occasionally to show understanding, and avoid crossing arms or appearing distracted.

10. End on a Positive Note

- **Why:** Discussing traumatic events can leave an interviewee feeling emotionally drained. Ending on a positive or neutral note helps them leave the interview feeling more balanced.
- **How:** After discussing difficult topics, ask a lighter question or reflect on a strength they demonstrated during the experience.

11. Respect Their Boundaries

- **Why:** The interviewee might need to set limits on what they can share, especially if the topic is particularly sensitive.
- **How:** Be attuned to their verbal and non-verbal cues. If they seem uncomfortable, gently offer to move to a different topic or take a break.

12. Follow Up After the Interview

- **Why:** Following up shows that you care about their well-being beyond just the content of the interview.
- **How:** Send a thank-you note or check in with them later to see how they're feeling.

13. Provide Resources If Needed

- **Why:** Discussing traumatic experiences can sometimes reopen wounds, and the interviewee might need support afterward.
- **How:** Have contact information for mental health resources available, and offer it if you sense the interviewee might need it.

14. Keep Personally Identifiable Data To a Minimum

- **Why:** The Empathy Archive provides anonymized stories and related data. In order to properly keep identities anonymous, certain data should be avoided.
- **How:** No names should be used (or at least should be replaced with pseudonyms), no specifics beyond city, state should be used.

▼ Avoid Specific Data Points

To maintain anonymity and protect privacy, avoid mentioning the following:

- Full names of individuals (including the storyteller)
- Exact dates of birth
- Complete addresses
- Phone numbers
- Email addresses
- Social Security numbers or other government identification numbers
- Specific workplace names (unless it's a large, general employer)
- Unique physical characteristics that could identify an individual
- Names of schools attended (unless it's a very large, well-known institution)
- Exact dates of specific events (you can use general timeframes instead)
- License plate numbers
- Unique medical conditions (unless central to the story and anonymized)
- Financial information (specific salaries, account numbers, etc.)

▼ Use Generic Terms When Possible

- Instead of specific job titles, use general career fields
- Replace specific relationship labels with general terms (e.g., "a family member" instead of "my sister")
- Use age ranges rather than specific ages
- Refer to locations by general area or type rather than specific names (e.g., "a coffee shop downtown" instead of "Starbucks on Main Street")

15. Informed Consent

- Ensure that the storyteller understands how their story will be used and that it will be anonymized

- Get verbal consent on the recording for the story to be used in the Empathy Archive

Remember, the goal is to share the essence and impact of the story while protecting the privacy of all individuals involved.