

Elderly Communications Tips

Interviewing an Elderly Subject

- First and foremost, make the person feel safe.
- Always interview the older adult alone, no matter what a family member or caregiver tells you. A victim will not speak freely while someone else is present.
- Always assume the victim is credible, even if there is a known or suspected dementia diagnosis. Studies show that older adults with dementia can still accurately recount abuse most of the time. Additionally, an abuser may fabricate cognitive impairment to isolate the victim.
- Clearly identify yourself, using your name and title.
- Make sure the older adult has the assistive devices they need to interact meaningfully (e.g. glasses, hearing aid).
- Speak to the older adult at eye level; do not tower over them.
- Give an older adult time to process the situation.
- Be patient and slow down the interview process.
- Ask one question at a time. Don't ask compound questions.
- Take frequent breaks. Older adults can tire easily.
- Ensure there are no distractions such as a television playing or too many people in the room.
- Provide food and water as needed. Older adults are often chronically dehydrated, which can lead to mental confusion.
- Conduct the interview somewhere where the elderly person feels comfortable, often this means in the home rather than in a police station.
- People with early onset of dementia are better cognitively in the early daytime hours, set interview times between 8:00-11:00am when possible.
- Pay attention to signs of discomfort. When a victim's body language changes, it is an indicator that a question hit a nerve or they are not telling the truth. If they stop making eye contact, ask for a break and take note that the subject of the question needs to be further investigated.
- Address common fears. Many elderly people are dependent on their caregivers and fear losing them. They also fear being removed from their home and put in a nursing home.
- Provide information about available help and resources.
- Older Adults of all ages have the right to make bad decisions. Older people are adults with decision-making capacity and they have the right to exercise free choice, even if those decisions appear to be harmful, said Solomon. They can refuse services as long as their decision has a sound basis in reality and they fully understand the consequences.
- However, if a person's capacity is questionable, it is important for police officers to contact experts to evaluate and determine the person's ability to make sound decisions. Officers can reach out to government adult protective services, medical professionals, geriatric psychiatrists, community agencies, and victim support groups for assistance.

Evaluating an elderly subject's senses

- Assessing a subject's eyesight and hearing is obviously important with respect to credibility if that individual claims to be a witness or victim of a crime. Furthermore, failure to recognize vision or hearing problems within a subject may cause misleading behavior symptoms during an interview.
- An investigator should not approach an elderly subject with any expectation of physical or mental impairment. In other words, it would be improper for the investigator to initially talk loudly, to use simple words, or to over-explain the situation.
- Rather, when interviewing an elderly subject the investigator should have a heightened awareness of the individual's possible sensory limitations and be prepared to adjust interviewing techniques accordingly.
- Simple observation may reveal that a subject wears strong eyeglasses or hearing aids. Observing the subject during conversation may indicate a tendency for the subject to turn a "good ear" toward the investigator when a question is asked or to offer an inappropriate response to a question that was asked when the subject was not facing the investigator.
- When sight or hearing is relevant to the subject's testimony, it is important to establish whether or not the subject was wearing glasses or hearing aids at the time an event occurred.
- As one ages, often more light is required for the eyes to focus and discern particular features. When an elderly subject is offering eye witness evidence, the investigator should carefully document the amount of light present at the time of the initial event. For the same reason, if an elderly subject is asked to identify a photograph or the signature on a canceled check, for example, the document or object should be well lighted.

When interviewing an elderly person with affected hearing, police officers tend to make two errors:

- (1) The investigator significantly increases his/her volume when asking a question;
 - (2) The investigator treats the subject as if a hearing impairment also decreases the subject's IQ.
- If a subject has impaired hearing, the investigator should maintain a normal volume when asking questions but slow down the rate of speaking words – under this circumstance carefully enunciating each word is often sufficient to allow the subject to understand the investigator.
 - It is also important for the investigator to maintain direct eye contact when asking questions, as many hearing impaired individuals will rely on visual cues to interpret verbal communication.
 - Finally, an investigator should not be shy in asking an elderly subject about failing sight, hearing or other relevant medical issues. It is not at all unprofessional or insulting for an investigator to sincerely ask an elderly subject, "Andy are you able to understand me all right?" or, "Julie is there enough light for you to see these pictures?"
 - Affected Memory
 - All memories eventually decay to the point of being irretrievable, or perhaps, even erased. This gradual inability to recall long-term events occurs, more or less, on an even continuum throughout our lives, provided the individual is not suffering from a disease that abnormally

impairs memory, e.g., Alzheimer's disease. Similarly, as a person ages short-term memory also decreases.

- Since most daily tasks require short-term memory ("Where did I park the car?" "Did I buy milk yesterday?"), this type of memory loss is most apparent and bothersome. Because distortions or omissions in long-term memory are typically unverifiable and have no immediate consequence, the perception is that long-term memory remains intact in the elderly, when in fact, it may also be affected.
- During an interview, both a subject's long and short-term memory can significantly affect the quantity and accuracy of information learned.

To address affected memories, there are two procedures an investigator should use when interviewing an elderly subject;

- (1) Gauge the subject's accuracy for long-term recall;
 - When an interview involves long-term memory, the investigator should ask corroborative questions to help assess the trustworthiness of the subject's memory.
 - Corroborative questions request information that can be independently verified. For example, when discussing a robbery that occurred 25 years ago, the subject may be asked what his home address was, who his immediate supervisor was or what the weather conditions were on the day of the robbery.
 - It is not significant if the subject is unable to recall these details. However, if the subject claims to recall this type of information and subsequent checking indicates that their recall was faulty, this finding suggests possible other errors in the subject's recollections.
 - Including corroborative questions during an interview of an elderly subject may also be beneficial during court testimony in that the investigator will be able to describe to the court why he found the subject's memory trustworthy.
- (2) Use techniques to enhance the subject's memory.
 - In addition to aging neuro-pathways and diminished blood supply to parts of the brain, other factors contribute to an elderly person's inability to immediately recall information. Some of these include intense emotional states such as anxiety, distrust or fear. Environmental distractions (sounds, movement) can also inhibit the ability to recall information. While some memory loss is unavoidable, an investigator can increase the amount of information recalled by an elderly subject during an interview by following these guidelines:
 - Most people can relate to the high school experience of sitting down for a final examination and initially being unable to recall anything that was studied. Anxiety, apprehension and fear all greatly reduce a person's ability to recall information. Thus, at the outset of the interview the investigator should take time to establish rapport. Especially with an elderly subject it is important to establish a level of trust and emotional comfort before discussing the issue under investigation. To do this the investigator could exhibit a sincere interest in some aspect of the subject's life. The conversation may center on the subject's career, family, neighborhood, house or yard.
 - Diminish outside distractions. Any subject's cognitive functioning will be higher in an environment that is quiet and free from visual stimulation such as moving people or multiple investigators asking questions. This guideline operates ten-fold for the elderly.

- Just as it takes elderly subjects longer to move from one place to another or to finish a meal, it also takes them longer to retrieve memories. Investigators must literally allow elderly subjects more time to recall information asked during an interview. If an investigator asks questions rapidly or exhibits nonverbal symptoms of being impatient, this will enhance the subject's level of anxiety, and consequently, decrease his or her ability to recall information. A slow, methodical questioning technique is much more appropriate for an elderly subject.
- Do not suggest possible answers. A cooperative subject often wants to please the investigator by providing requested information. However, if the subject cannot recall the requested information, he or she may be very willing to agree with an answer suggested by the investigator. When a cooperative subject states that he or she cannot recall specific information, consider these options:
 - Skip over the incident and return to it later. The topic may be too sensitive for the subject to discuss at the present time or simply be too trivial for the subject to recall. Frequently, by returning to the topic later during the interview, the subject will provide the requested information.
 - If appropriate, explore prior memory connections to stimulate recall. Examples of this would be: "Did the person remind you of anyone you know?" "Did the person talk like anyone you know?" "Were you aware of any familiar smells that reminded you of someone or somewhere else?" If the subject answers "yes" to this type of question, obviously the investigator would first pursue the prior memory and then tie it in to the current event, e.g., "Why did this man remind you of your nephew in California?"
 - At the conclusion of the interview ask the subject to think about the requested information and to call the investigator if anything else comes to mind. This procedure is also beneficial when the subject is reluctant to reveal information in front of another person present during the interview, e.g., a spouse or relative.
 - In summary, there are unique issues relating to the interview of elderly subjects investigators need to be aware of and, if possible, compensate for. When showing an elderly person a photograph or other document, make certain there is sufficient light in the room. When speaking to a subject with impaired hearing, the investigator should slow down the rate of speaking and maintain eye contact. The investigator should not talk to the subject as though the person is mentally deficient.
 - The investigator should test the elderly subject's memory by asking corroborative questions during an interview. In this regard, the investigator should make an effort to reduce anxiety by establishing a rapport with the subject, allow sufficient time for the subject to remember and not force or suggest answers when the subject initially claims not to be able to remember.

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