

LESSONS LEARNED

while reporting on allegations of sexual assault in a therapist's office
By Jessica Miller, The Salt Lake Tribune

Source Material: [A Utah Therapist Built a Reputation for Helping Gay Latter-day Saints. These Men Say He Sexually Abused Them.](#)

CONSULT NEWSROOM EXPERTS

I like to read over tip sheets from the [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#) before interviewing someone who has experienced trauma to refresh myself on best practices. They often have tip sheets for a specific population — [like tips for interviewing orphaned children](#) — that can be helpful, even if you've done interviews in the past with people who have experienced trauma.

Also, it can be beneficial to look within your newsroom for those reporters who are great interviewers, and talk to them about how they might approach a sensitive interview.

CORROBORATE THEIR ACCOUNT

Sometimes an alleged victim's story can be corroborated through public records, such as if they've reported to police or filed a civil lawsuit. But when those steps haven't been taken, there are still ways to verify that this person has been consistently telling the same account over time.

Ask them if they have kept a journal, or sent emails or texts with details about the experience they are sharing with you. Who did they tell after this had happened? Having conversations with the people who they entrusted with this information can help verify timelines and details they've shared. While this reporting may result in just a small sentence in the story, it goes a long way to strengthen the story.

KEEP YOUR SOURCES INFORMED

When interviewing people about their own lived experiences, it's important to remember that this may be the first time they've spoken to a reporter before. Don't assume they understand the process, and be clear to explain what terms like "off the record" or "on background" means. Keep them informed throughout the reporting process, especially on longer projects with a lot of data or moving pieces. When I end a conversation with an alleged victim, I almost always ask them if they have any questions for me or about the reporting process.

CONTACTING THE ACCUSED

When attempting to get comment from a person who is accused, it's important to give them ample time to respond to the accusations and your questions. If I can, I like to give them a week. If they won't agree to a sit down interview, I will send a list of questions which address each key point of the story — and each allegation a person has made which will be included in the story. The goal in forming these questions is to ensure that they won't be surprised by anything that's in the story after publication, and that they've had the opportunity to respond to each point that is included.

If a person has not responded to you — or started exchanging messages but then stopped — I have found success in sending these questions via certified mail which will require their signature. They still may not respond, but it's peace of mind that they received the questions and are aware of the article that will be published.

PROTECT YOURSELF

Reporting about sexual assault or other sensitive topics can be difficult and feels all-consuming at times. I am still learning ways to protect myself while reporting on these topics. I try to limit the number of sensitive interviews I do in a single day; usually I will try to not do more than two, even if on deadline. Taking breaks is important, and finding a relaxing, non-work activity to look forward to can help you feel more balanced. (I like to do yoga or go on a hike.) [The Dart Center](#) is a great resource on this topic.