



NMVC

National Mass Violence Center

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

National Mass Violence Center
Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences
Medical University of South Carolina
67 President Street, MSC 863
Charleston, SC 29425
NMVRC.org

Tips for Crime Victims and Survivors: Guidelines for Media Interviews

In the aftermath of a mass violence incident (MVI), there is always strong media interest in speaking to victims, survivors, first responders and other witnesses. These guidelines can help you think about and plan for your potential interactions with the news media.

1. You should plan for media interviews. Often the most effective media interviews are those that are carefully considered in advance, with attention paid to the key points you want to make. You should think about and outline what you want to say in order of priority to ensure that your key messages are conveyed concisely and to the point. Victim Service Professionals (VSPs) can help you plan and even conduct a “mock interview” with you so that you better understand the process and gain experience in fielding questions.

2. You can have a VSP or support person accompany you to media interviews. It’s helpful to have another person whom you know and trust join you for media interviews. He or she can provide moral support, tend to your personal comfort, and help you cope with any stress reactions you may have.

3. You should expect to be treated with respect by the news media, whether reporters, photographers or camera crews. While media interviews can be stressful to victims, they should always be conducted in a manner that is courteous and respectful. You and your VSP or support person(s) should discuss strategies about how to respond if they are not. It may make sense to have a pre-arranged signal that you can use to alert your VSP or support person(s) to end the interview if you are experiencing stress, or if certain boundaries are crossed.

4. You do not have to speak to the media and can say “no” to requests for interviews, even if you have previously granted interviews. You should never feel obligated to speak about the MVI or your personal victimization. An important aspect of regaining control over your life following a MVI is making decisions that are best for your life, and your needs at any given time. You should never feel pressured to grant an interview.



5. You can select the date, time, and location for a media interview. You can take charge of the process by granting interviews that fit within your life, your schedule, and how you are feeling. However, be aware that the media often work on tight deadlines, so it’s a good idea to try and meet their scheduling needs to the degree possible.

6. You can select the platform or process for a media interview. Media interviews can be conducted in-person or over the telephone. They can also be conducted using a variety of online applications that allow you to participate in broadcast interviews from the privacy of your own home or any other place where you feel safe.

7. You can select a spokesperson or advocate of your choice to speak on your behalf to the media. You can choose to have a family member, friend, faith community leader, or VSP represent you in the media, either as your principal spokesperson or in cases where it is not possible to conduct an interview. Choose somebody you trust and establish clear guidelines for representation (such as key points you want to make and issues that you consider “off limits” for interviews).



Tips for Crime Victims and Survivors: Guidelines for Media Interviews

8. You can release a written or oral statement through a spokesperson instead of an interview. The benefits of a written or oral statement are that the media get at least part of the information they are seeking; your feelings and opinions are clearly conveyed; and there is no margin of error for inaccuracies.

9. You can avoid a stressful atmosphere by speaking to only one reporter at a time. For some victims, a press conference or environment with multiple journalists present can be overwhelming. VSPs can help you schedule individual interviews at the time and location of your choosing. In high pressure situations with multiple news outlets looking for interviews, you or VSPs can also request “pool coverage,” with journalists nominating one reporter who shares the interview or notes or footage with colleagues.

10. You can recommend “ground rules” or boundaries for all media interviews. VSPs can help you consider any “ground rules” that can facilitate a more effective interview and avoid discussing issues that may be potentially traumatic to you. Examples include: your desire for a support person to be present; topics that are “off limits;” any limitations on visual depictions of your face or visual image; and an agreement to take breaks during the interview or end it if needed.

11. You can refrain from answering any question that makes you uncomfortable. You do not need to answer a question just because it is asked. If a question appears to be insensitive to you or makes you uncomfortable, you or your support person can simply state that you are unwilling to answer the question, or ask that the question be rephrased.

12. You can end an interview at any time. Remember that it is your choice to participate in a media interview. If an interview becomes too stressful, it is your option and choice to end it.

13. You can audiotape or videotape all interviews to document the accuracy of what you say. Smart phone technology makes it simple to audiotape or videotape media interviews (which also provides you with a personal record of the full interview before it is edited).

14. You can ask in advance what the story will be about. If you have an idea about the scope of the story, you can better prepare for an interview. Most reporters will give you or your support person a general idea of what the story is about. However, you need to be aware that editors and producers almost always have the last say about what the story will include from the interview.

15. You can request a specific reporter. In the course of intense media interest in MVIs, you may identify a reporter with whom you are comfortable and, to the contrary, reporters with whom you are uncomfortable. You can ask a VSP for advice about which reporter should be granted an interview. Choosing a specific reporter is another element that can help you regain control following the MVI.

16. You can refuse an interview with a specific reporter, even if you have granted interviews to other reporters. You can refuse an interview with a reporter who has been insensitive or who has been inaccurate in conducting previous interviews.

17. You can and should exclude young children from interviews. Young children are particularly vulnerable to the traumatic effects of a crime. They rely on adults for support and decision-making, and to protect them from further harm. They cannot make a responsible “choice” to be included in an interview and, particularly in times of crisis, should not be exposed to media attention. The parent or caretaker of young children can decide if he or she wants to represent the child in an interview.

“You do not have to speak to the media and can say ‘no’ to requests for interviews, even if you have previously granted interviews.”



Tips for Crime Victims and Survivors: Guidelines for Media Interviews

18. You can demand a correction when inaccurate information is reported. If you feel that information is not accurate or that you were misquoted or taken out of context, it's important to raise these concerns with reporters and their editors or producers. Mistakes are usually unintentional and can be corrected.

19. You can conduct a television interview using a silhouette or a newspaper interview without having your photograph taken. Your right to privacy should not preclude you from granting media interviews, since modern technology can often protect your privacy without preventing you from speaking to the media.

20. You can completely give your side of the story related to your victimization. Your perceptions and recollections about the MVI and its impact on you and others are highly personal and important to share.

21. You can file a formal complaint against a journalist. If you have a problem with any news coverage resulting from a personal interview, you may first want to talk with the reporter about your complaint. If you do not get satisfaction, you can send a formal complaint to their editors and producers, as well as publishers and owners.



SCAN TO DOWNLOAD

The NMVC is grateful to Bruce Shapiro and Elana Newman of the DART Center for Journalism & Trauma for their collaboration on this tip sheet.