

Does Asking Victimized Youth Sensitive Questions Cause Additional Distress and Trauma?

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There is some debate whether asking questions to those who have experienced abuse and victimization forces them to relive the trauma, and if asking the questions is therefore justified. This question is further complicated when deciding whether to ask these questions to youth or adolescents as opposed to fully grown adults. In the small number of studies found on this topic, the authors stated also being surprised by the small amount of previous research done. Most studies asked questions about previous victimization and abuse, with some other sensitive topics also being covered such as violence, suicide, drug use, STDs, etc.

The major findings were:

- In defense of asking sensitive questions to youth, caregivers and young people indicate that sensitive surveys are important to conduct (Fisher, 2003; Helweg-Larsen, Sundaram, Curtis, & Larsen, 2003).
- In studies assessing the impact of sensitive questions that involved youth (Ybarra, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Friend, & Diener-West, 2009; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Arata, O'Brien, Bowers, & Klibert, 2006) and women (Walker, Newman, Koss, & Bernstein, 1997), only a small percentage of participants indicated distress while filling out surveys asking sensitive questions about previous victimization and abuse and other sensitive topics.
- Studies found that factors like history of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and suicide, drug use, neuroticism, and post-traumatic stress disorder were more common in the small percentage of participants for which distress occurred when filling out a survey. Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2006, p. 442) concluded the following:

As a whole, these findings suggest that, although adolescents who have experienced sensitive events in their lives are more likely to experience some distress while completing questionnaires about risk behaviors, the impact of these sensitive events questions appears to be relatively minor for most higher-risk youth. In fact, the increased distress level might be more a function of the experiences these adolescents have endured than the survey per se.

- Walker, Newman, Koss, and Bernstein (1997) asked victimized women three questions at the end of the survey regarding how traumatic their experience was in filling out the questionnaire.

More than 25% of the women felt they gained something positive from completing the questionnaire, and only 13% felt they did not. When asked whether they would still complete the survey even if they knew in advance how they felt, 76% said they would, with 5% saying they would not. Despite the sensitive nature of the items in the questionnaire, only 13% of the respondents felt that the experience was more upsetting than they had anticipated (p. 406).

Furthermore, the great majority of women who reported distress in filling out the questionnaire did not express regret at having taken the survey, suggesting that their distress in filling out the survey was within tolerable limits and in line with the amount of anxiety they expected to feel. However, as Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2006) note, these results on adult women should not be generalized to the more vulnerable population of adolescents.

- Concerning youth, distress could be expected if participants were worried that teachers or other students could become aware of their personal information or responses or if the adolescent participant feared reprisals from their reports of engagement in illegal behavior (e.g., Moolchan & Mermelstein, 2002). Therefore, confidentiality of surveys should be perceived as high by those taking the survey to minimize this distress.
- Fisher, Higgins-D'Alessandro, Rau, Kuther, & Belanger (1996) stated that adolescents may want and/or expect that the investigators will assist them in getting help on the basis of their responses to surveys about sensitive behaviors, such as suicide and drug use, while Ybarra et al. (2009) reached the conclusion that care should be taken to ensure appropriate referral to support services if needed after youth answer sensitive questions. Ybarra et al. (2009) even encouraged researchers to routinely include questions about distress in youth health surveys, such as "How upset were you while taking this survey?" Responses can then be used to flag participants who might benefit from additional follow-up, either via a specialized message (e.g., "You said some of the questions upset you. We want you to know there is help and we strongly encourage you to reach out to someone if you need to") or a direct contact from research staff.

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