


# TRAUMA INFORMED PRINCIPLES FOR CLIENT SURVEYS

Putting principles into  
practice while evaluating  
sexual assault programs



In working to address sexual violence and support survivors, it is important to be trauma-conscious and informed in our approach to how we evaluate the work we do. While services can be described as warming and caring, efforts to evaluate our programs can feel jarring with a paper or online survey that may feel incongruent from the care and attention they just received. Surveys are not necessarily the most trauma-informed method of soliciting feedback. In some cases, surveys might provide a layer of anonymity that might foster honest opinions. Too often, however, not enough information is given about how they will be used, and who will see them. The questions are commonly written with funders in mind rather than the clients. At TAASA, we often say it's easy to write a bad survey and hard to write a good survey. Considering the needs of diverse clients and ensuring that we take the same care with developing, administering, and using surveys as we do with our services can fall the wayside in crisis environments with competing priorities.

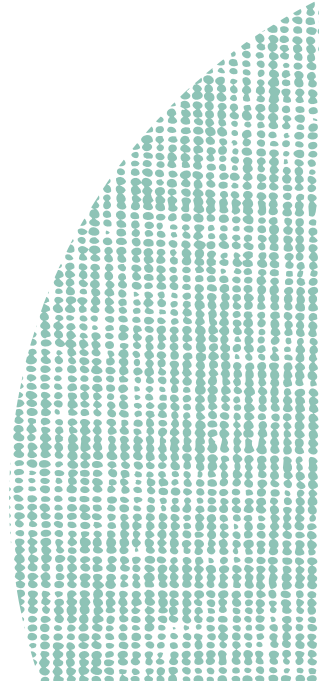
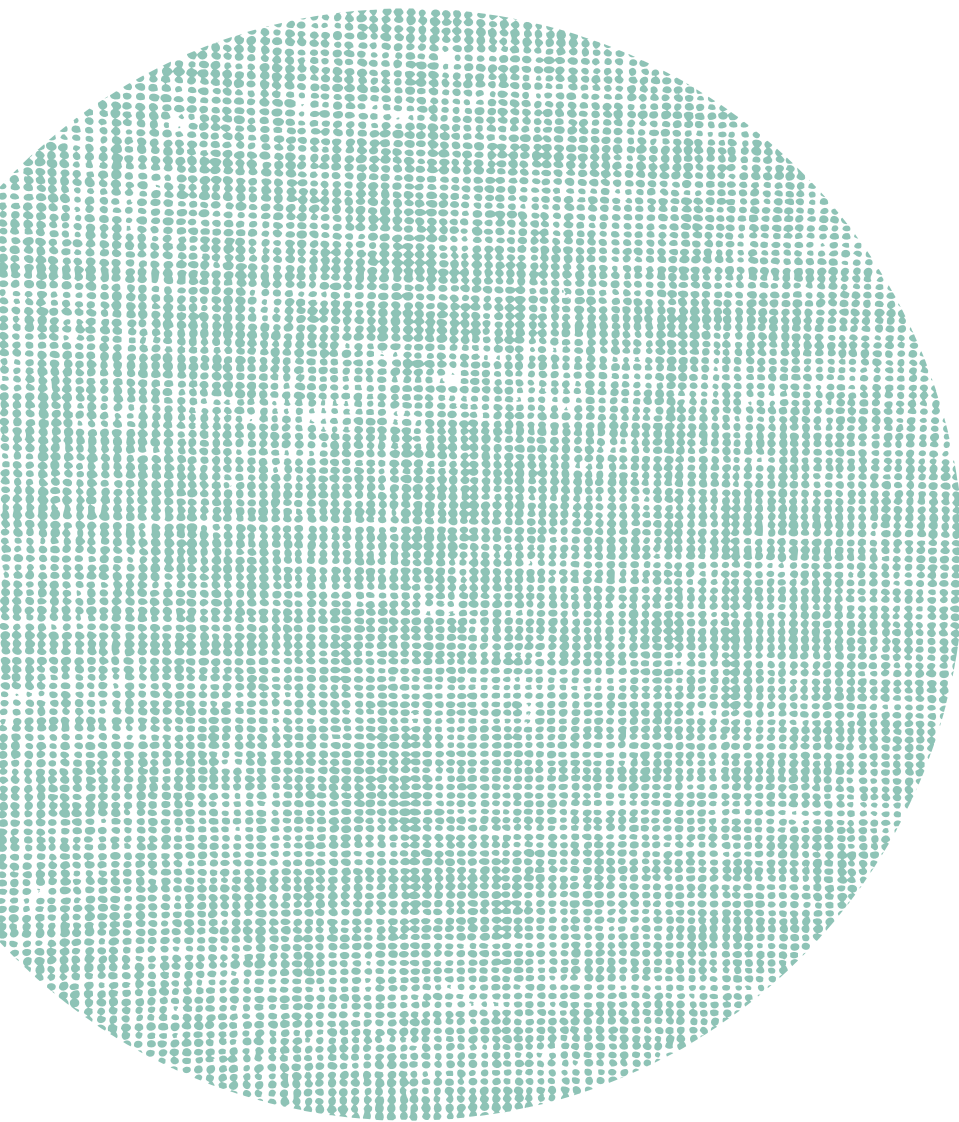
In this vein, we offer considerations and examples of making surveys more aligned with the trauma-informed (TI) principles of safety; transparency & trustworthiness; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues. Some of these are easily put into practice while others might require a great deal of buy-in and commitment on the part of the agency to engage with survivors - clients, past clients, and community members, in new and different ways. These latter suggestions are where evaluation has the ability to become part of the intervention and vice versa and where we believe the most transformative change can take place. We hope this guide will aid in that transformative change.

Sincerely,  
Maya Pilgrim, Karen Limon, and Amelia Romo.  
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The following document was developed in collaboration with fierce advocates and sexual assault program staff across the state of Texas from the following agencies that attended our Survey Repair Shop Writing Workshop in May of 2023:

Abigail's Arms, Asian Family Support Services of Austin, Bay Area Turning Point, Crime Victim Assistance Center, Daya, Eastland Crisis Center, Family Crisis Center, FamilyTime Crisis and Counseling Center, First Step, Inc., Freedom House, Grayson Crisis Center, HCWC, Henderson County HELP Center, Houston Area Women's Center, Katy Christian Ministries Crisis Center, Mama Sana Vibrant Woman, Matagorda County Women's Crisis Center, Mid Coast Family Services. Sexual Assault Resource Center, TAASA, and Voice of Hope.



# CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

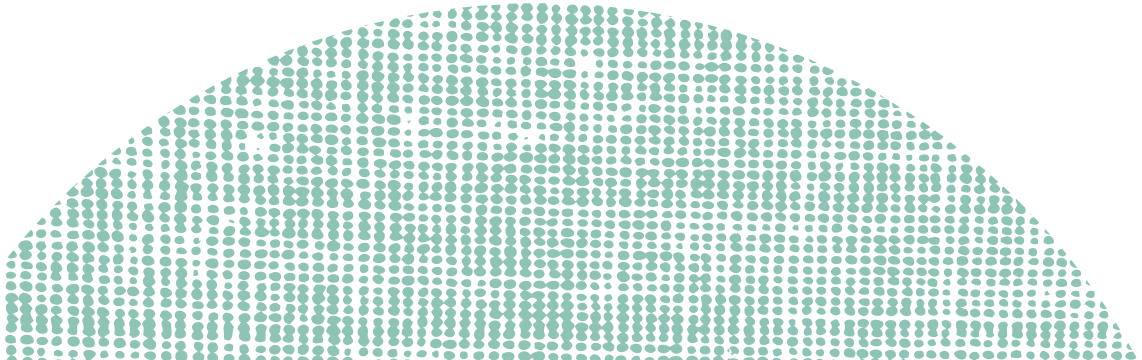
Before a survey ever reaches a survivor, it's important that we contextualize the survey in a way that highlights TI Principles, particularly around safety, transparency & trustworthiness, and empowerment voice & choice. We can reassure their safety by letting them know who will see their responses and having a plan in case any questions seem to trigger a heightened response in a survivor. We can model transparency and trustworthiness by informing of why we are asking these questions, who will see their responses and how their responses will be used or shared. We can provide opportunity for empowerment, voice and choice but letting them know that they are able to opt out of any questions or the survey entirely. Below is sample language that staff can use prior to giving a survey to a survivor. You are free to use this language but ensure what is explained here accurately describes the situation at your agency.

- Why am I being given this? We'd like you to answer this survey to understand what services were helpful and what can be improved at [agency name]. This is to measure our progress, not yours.
- Who will see it? Your advocate will not see your answers, but the data manager does see your answers and your name. Before sharing this data, the data manager will remove your name, so your answers are not tied to you.
- How will you use this? Your answers will be shared with our grant funders which help us to keep providing services. We also use the data to understand what we can do better.
- This survey is completely optional, and you are able to skip a question you don't want to answer or opt out at any time.
- If the survey feels triggering in anyway, please let your advocate know how you're feeling so they can support you and follow up with you to answer any questions



# CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, AND GENDER ISSUES

This principle is normally listed last. For this guide, it is important to place it first. The subsequent five principles should be followed with a lens of being attentive to cultural, historical, and gender issues. "We serve everyone" is not enough. The goal is to serve everyone well and to provide services in a way that validates and celebrates them wholly. Putting this principle into practice means having an understanding of how racism and oppression impact communities and survivors and paying attention to how they might show up inside the walls of your agency. It requires humility, curiosity, and vulnerability, and this guide on surveys is but a step or two in a much larger journey.

- Strive to build trust, collaboration, and connection with diverse communities and survivors. Ensure that co-creation and collaboration with clients and community is intersectional and takes into account those underrepresented or most impacted by systemic racism and oppression.
  - Different communities have different ways of communicating and histories around data collection – some very traumatic and harmful. Some communities are more likely to be frank with someone outside of their community while others might be more honest with someone within their community. Explore with curiosity how survey administration might be tailored to best meet the needs of these different communities.
  - Be aware of the language you are using and avoid using terms that have historically been used against marginalized communities. This includes terms like “at-risk” or “impoverished,” for example.
  - Use gender-neutral language that does not assume the gender or sexuality of the survivor or the person who has harmed them.
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# SAFETY

- If the survey is online, ensure there is an exit button or make it explicit how they can exit as quickly as possible.
- If the survey is given in person, consider if there is anything potentially triggering on the survey. Provide support during or after the survey and ensure they are aware that support is available and ready.
- Be explicit if the responses are tied to their client information. Clients deserve the ability to measure their need for services with their responses being shared with the people providing services. If the agency is able to provide an anonymous survey or a survey that is confidential to the data team so that direct service providers are not able to see a client's response, that will provide the agency with more honest answers.
- Consider their physical and emotional safety - how will the client feel safest in answering the survey? What space are they given to take it? If it's on their phones, remind them to delete their browsing history afterward.

# TRUSTWORTHINESS & TRANSPARENCY

- As we discussed above, develop a script for staff to use before giving a survey so that survivors are informed on why we're doing a survey and how we're using it.
- In the same vein as safety, it's important to be transparent about who will have access to their responses and what they will be able to see. To get the most accurate responses, ensure that clients can physically see their name/information is not on the survey so they may feel safer in sharing their real answers. It is also easier to ensure clients that their answers will not affect the quality of their services.
- Provide the clearest and most informative instructions to the survivor.
- Use simple and straightforward language - avoid jargon and acronyms. Surveys to the general public should aim to be rated at a 4th-8th grade level. You can see the grade level of your survey in Word by 1) going to options under File, 2) selecting proofing, 3) checking the "Show readability statistics" option, and then 4) running a spelling and grammar check on your survey.
- Ensure that the data being collected is relevant to the purpose and actively being utilized. Do not ask questions that you do not have the capacity to use or review.
- Include a statement at the end to see if the client wants to be notified about the results or point them to a webpage or social media account where they can see the results. Make sure that results are shared with these clients in some way - email, social media, text, webpage. Be explicit about time frames and where to look.
- Ask questions at the right time. Ensure that they are not being asked inappropriate questions at intake or too soon into services to be able to answer.

# PEER SUPPORT

- For surveys around peer support services – avoid using a survey! Take notes or have a group discussion about the impact of the space, what they enjoy, and what can be improved. In this way, data collection can feel more similar to how the group operates rather than providing an individualized survey.
- Ask people with lived experiences to review surveys or group discussion questions prior to sharing them with clients.
- Provide questions that explore if they are benefiting from peer support and use the responses to find ways to build community and peer support among survivors receiving services.



# COLLABORATION AND MUTUALITY

- Collaborate with survivors or compensate past clients to co-create the survey. *\*See Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues.*
- Survey results ideally lead to actionable information. Consider ways to ensure that those who take the survey not only have access to the results but also have a say in what is done with the information and identifying the next steps.
- Engage with clients, survivors, and past clients when analyzing the data to ensure their perspectives are given in the analysis. Consider creating a survivor committee that reviews surveys and forms together so that no one person is expected to represent all perspectives.
- Collaborate with representatives from many communities to make sure it is resonant and accessible to all.
- When possible, strive for mutual understanding with funders. Advocate for centering survivors' experiences when working and discussing reporting outcomes. Communicate with grantors on our limitations and why some of the metrics they would like from us are not ok to ask from survivors/participants. If possible, collaborate with grantors, survivors, and agency staff to come up with a suitable approach.

# EMPOWERMENT, VOICE, & CHOICE

- Clients should always be informed that 1) the survey is entirely optional; 2) they can skip any question they don't want to answer and 3) can decide to stop taking the survey altogether after they have started. The client should be informed about their options before they start taking the survey. Ensure that a statement detailing their options is clearly written on the survey itself, however, do not assume that every client will have the ability to read this statement or find it useful. The delivery of their options should be tailored to best fit the client's needs and abilities.
- Provide options for clients and survivors on how they would best prefer to answer the survey – paper, online, or interview style and where they would prefer to take it (at the office, in the lobby, at home, etc.)
- Rephrase grant-required measures into questions adapted for our specific communities.
- Differentiate between what you need to know and what you want to know. Only include what you need to know in your survey.
- Incorporate questions on how clients prefer to receive communication from the agency and ensure those can be accommodated.
- Provide questions about what's going well as well as what isn't going well to avoid skewed responses.
- Utilize solution-focused questions on where the agency can grow or improve such as, "If we received a grant to expand or improve services, what do you suggest we add or improve?" That might provide a place for clients to pinpoint areas of growth without leaving negative feedback.