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TDC Tip

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Cognitive Interview Steps

Last month, we reviewed the steps of the Free Format Interview. As promised, we would now like to turn to a more complex interviewing technique – The Cognitive Interview. This is very helpful in eliciting more detailed information from people involved in high profile cases.

The Cognitive Interview was developed after investigators were challenged in court for using forensic hypnosis due to issues pertaining to suggestibility. Forensic Hypnosis does not pass the “Frye Test” as established by case law. As an alternative, psychologists created the Cognitive Interview as a Memory Enhancement Tool for investigative interviewing.

Let’s review the steps. Just as with the Free Format Interview, begin with a professional opening, establish rapport, and advise the subject that you wish to conduct a “special” type of interview. Remind them that you will be there with them for quite a while so that you can conduct a thorough interview. This case is important to you and you want to obtain as much detail as possible.

Step 1: Ensure completeness/privacy

- Request that they tell you **everything**, no matter how minor
- Advise them that they may mention **anything** that comes to mind, even if out of context or chronological order
- Ensure complete privacy throughout the interview
- Ask the subject to face a blank wall (or close their eyes) as this will help them recall specifics about the incident

Step 2: Reconstruct all aspects of the scene “mentally”

- Use below-listed questions to help them **visualize** who, what, where, when, why and how:
 - **Time of day, day of week**
 - **General location, environment**
 - **Specific location, distances**
 - **Lighting, weather conditions**
 - **Visual impairments (glasses, shrubs, etc.)**
 - **Activity, thoughts before, during and after the event**
 - **Sounds, odors, emotions felt**

Step 3: Conduct a Free-Format interview

- Narrative Statement – listen and watch as subject tells their entire “story”
- First Paraphrase - paraphrase subject's narrative statement, fill in holes

- Who-What-Where-When-Why- How – prepared/new questions, details
- Second Paraphrase – review the statement and make corrections as necessary

NOTE: Refer to the *TDC Tip* article on Free-Format Interview for further information.

Step 4: Reverse order

- Have subject recall his/her statement in **reverse** chronological order
 - This may assist the subject in recalling additional details he/she otherwise may not remember
 - The truthful subject will most likely cooperate with this request, while the deceptive subject will most likely show some resistance

Step 5: Change perspective

- Have the witness mentally put themselves in the shoes of **someone else**, or put themselves in a **different area** of the scene and tell you what happened
 - For example: If the witness was standing at the front of the convenience store during an armed robbery, ask them to place themselves at the rear of the store and to tell you what they would have seen from that perspective.
 - This may help them recall new details about the incident such as: a better physical or clothing description of the suspect's back; accomplices and associated vehicles waiting outside the store; or potential witnesses that may yield follow-up information

So when might an investigator opt to use the Cognitive Interview technique instead of the simpler (and shorter) Free Format Interview? The Cognitive Interview would be a good choice if your subject is having difficulty remembering details of the incident because they were traumatized or intoxicated at the time or the investigation is high profile in nature. Remember that this technique requires considerably more time, so be sure to allow for that and be patient.

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