

***INTERVIEWING VICTIMS OF TORTURE  
A HANDBOOK AND GUIDE FOR JOURNALISTS***

**Victims & the Media Program  
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**

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# PREFACE

The Victims and the Media Program at Michigan State University was established in 1991 to assist journalism students in reporting on victims of violence and catastrophe with the sensitivity, dignity and respect that they deserve. This handbook and guide is part of an ongoing effort to enrich and expand the program's scope by developing specialized guides that can assist future journalists and current professionals in their news coverage of various victims.

This handbook and guide for interviewing victims of torture is a product of many years of experience in interviewing and interacting with torture survivors and health professionals who work in the area of torture rehabilitation. As a Michigan State University graduate, I was one of few journalists fortunate to receive training on how to interview victims. That training proved extremely helpful in providing me with some basic tips about my interaction with the torture survivors such as what questions were appropriate and which were not. Still, it soon became apparent that these specific victims were vastly different from those that I had received training about (such as accident victims, rape victims, and victims of natural disaster). The unique horror of torture clearly set these victims apart from all other.

It was these personal experiences and my exposure to the work of health professionals who are working in the rehabilitation of torture survivors that allowed me to develop guidelines, in the hope they would provide an ethical and sensitive way to report on victims of torture. This is a field manual for journalists who will be interviewing torture survivors.

The first section offers an overview about the nature of torture and what it does to victims. In the second section there is a short Q & A that provides answers to some fundamental questions about torture, such as the legal definition, the methods, the victims, the torturers, the legal framework, and more. The third section is devoted to the "Do's and Don'ts" when interviewing torture survivors. Finally, there is list of resources that can help locate anti-torture experts, health professionals specializing in torture rehabilitation and rehabilitation centers in the U.S.

We hope that you find this guide useful and that you share it with your colleagues in the newsroom.

**Miron Varouhakis, February 2008**

# TORTURE SURVIVORS

Victims of torture are unique and special people. They have endured and survived the most unspeakable acts of physical and psychological torture and have found the strength to reclaim their right to life.

The vast majority are private citizens who, until their incarceration and torture, had been living ordinary lives. Their torture shattered their lives and those of their loved ones. Torture is used to annihilate the victim's personality, to obtain information or confession, to punish and degrade, and to spread fear in the victim's community (which can include fellow prisoners, residents of their village, city, county or country, or members of political or religious group).

Not all survivors bear visual scars or marks on their faces and bodies. Psychological torture is a widespread method and it leaves no visible signs. Some torturers tend to favor psychological torture because the lack of obvious physical damage makes it harder to verify and document. Remember that the threat of torture is torture!

Health professionals who work to rehabilitate torture victims often prefer the term "torture survivors" rather than "victims." Not only does "survivor" sound more positive, but it also focuses on the future rather than the past. The word "victim" can carry a negative connotation that stigmatizes survivors who are trying to overcome the experience. The word "survivor" symbolizes empowerment, courage and strength, which can help people who have been tortured on the path of recovery. Torture survivors often feel guilt and shame as a result of the humiliation they have endured at the hands of their torturers, so referring to them as "survivors" rather than "victims" is very important. So, keep this in mind when you are interacting with a torture survivor or a group of them.

Another important note is that not all survivors are at the same mental state or stage of rehabilitation. Some of them have not received any support, some drop out of treatment and others find ways to recover. Health professionals who work in the rehabilitation of torture survivors note that the effects of torture go far beyond the immediate pain – physical or psychological. Almost all of the torture survivors suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms include flashbacks, severe anxiety, insomnia, nightmares, depression and memory lapses. Rehabilitation can help but PTSD symptoms can persist for decades. The rehabilitation of torture survivors is very complex and case-based. The goal is to empower victims so that they can live as full a life as possible.

It is important for journalists who come in contact with torture survivors to recognize their particularities and approach them with sensitivity and professionalism.

# FAQ: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Q: What is torture?**

A: “Torture is any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions.”  
(*Source: U.N. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment*).

**Q: How widespread is torture worldwide?**

A: It is estimated that acts of torture and ill-treatment are carried out in more than 150 countries. (*Source: Amnesty International 2006 Report*).

**Q: What are the most common torture methods?**

A: There are two main forms of torture: physical and psychological. Some of the most common methods of physical torture include beating, burns, electric shocks, rape and sexual assault, stretching, submersion, and suffocation. When it comes to psychological torture, the most common methods include humiliation, isolation, mock amputations, mock executions, threats, and witnessing the torture of others.

**Q: Who are the victims of torture?**

A: The victims are mostly ordinary people. Young boys and girls, mothers, fathers and grandfathers have all fallen victims of torture because in the eyes of the torturers, nobody is immune. Some of the most frequent victims of torture include health professionals, ethnic and religious minorities, human rights defenders, journalists, politicians, prisoners, student leaders, and union leaders.

**Q: Who are the torturers?**

A: In most cases the torturers are members of the police, prison guards, military, paramilitary forces, and state-sponsored guerilla forces. In some cases, torturers have also been health professionals, government officials, and death squads. Finally, in armed conflict cases the torturers can also be your next door neighbor.

**Q: Are there any conditions under which torture can be justified?**

A: No! The *Article 2* of the *U.N. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* states clearly that “no exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture.”

**Q: Are there countries where torture is legal?**

A: No! Torture is a crime under international law. This prohibition forms part of customary international law, which means that it is binding on every member of the international community, regardless of whether a State has ratified international treaties in which torture is expressly prohibited.

**Q: Why and when torture became a crime?**

A: In 1948, after the fallout of World War II, the international community condemned torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. In 1975 the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Being Subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, while the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment was adopted by the General Assembly in 1984 and came into force in 1987.

**Q: Is the U.S. signatory to the U.N. convention against torture?**

A: Yes. The U.S. became a signatory to the U.N. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment on 18 Apr. 1988 and ratified it on 21 Oct. 1994.

**Q: What are the chances of meeting a torture survivor in the U.S.?**

A: Great. The U.S. is home to more than 500,000 torture survivors.

# THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF INTERVIEWING TORTURE SURVIVORS

If you are working on a story that will require you to interview a torture survivor, make sure that you go well prepared.

- Conduct extensive research beforehand about the individual's case, country of origin, and of all background information that can help you have some understanding of the specifics of the story. Each case is different.
- Prepare your list of questions before the interview and make sure that the difficult questions are not at the top of the list. Include many open-ended questions that will allow the survivor to tell their story at their own pace.
- Do not overdress for the interview. Also, make sure that you don't wear any articles that may raise tension or agitate the torture survivor(s). Many of the survivors have been tortured for their political and religious beliefs, race, ethnicity, nationality, and other reasons. So make sure that your clothing and jewelry do not exhibit national or religious emblems, logos or statements.
- Ideally, female reporters should interview female torture survivors and male reporters should interview male survivors. If this is not possible, then ask the survivor if being interviewed by a member of the opposite sex would be all right with them before you meet for the interview. Many female victims of torture have been raped and sexually abused by male torturers, which could make it difficult for them to open up to a male interviewer. Males from some cultures are not accustomed to talk about their private affairs with women.
- Ask permission beforehand if you want to take photographs, audio recordings or video of a torture survivor. Don't assume that the survivor will have no objection. Many survivors have fled their countries to escape persecution and publishing their photo would expose them to danger. Some torture survivors were forced to make false confessions, so they may fear that an electronic recording of their testimony will be used against them. You may be able to reach a compromise by agreeing to obscure their face or their voice, but you need to negotiate this in advance.
- Discuss in advance an appropriate location for the interview. You want to make sure that the person feels comfortable. Avoid basements and small windowless rooms. Ask them to suggest appropriate venues.
- When you meet with a torture survivor be courteous but avoid making any facial expressions or verbal comments that show pity. Remember that torture survivors have endured and survived some of the most horrible acts you can imagine. The fact that they have survived and that they are willing to share

their story with a public audience means that they are strong people. They don't want pity but they do deserve sensitivity and respect.

- Before you start the interview, ask the torture survivor what name he or she would like used in the story. Using their real name might put them at risk. Also, ask the interviewee if they would like to be identified as a “torture survivor” or “torture victim” in the story. Some of the survivors may prefer to be identified as a victim.
- Maintain eye contact throughout the interview and be a good listener. They are trusting you with the most painful moments of their lives, so they deserve to have your full attention.
- Avoid distractions during the interview. Turn off cell phones, beepers and any other electronic communication devices that you may be carrying with you. Many survivors suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and disruptions could trigger intrusive recollections (flashbacks).
- Remain calm even when the torture survivor shares gruesome details of their torture. Try to avoid facial expression of horror or grief. Torture survivors will appreciate your empathy and concern, but extreme reactions can make them feel worse. Do not reach out to them or comfort them physically. Do not use expressions that have religious connotation (such as ‘Oh my God,’ ‘Jesus,’ ‘Mother of God,’ etc.). Do not trivialize their experience (for example, by saying ‘that must have hurt,’ or ‘that must have been hell.’). Don't patronize them. Don't ask invasive questions (‘how do you feel?’ etc.). Just listen closely and be calm and attentive. If you can't control your emotions, ask for a brief recess.
- You should be ready to accept that a torture survivor may feel uncomfortable answering a particular question. Don't press. You should also be ready to accept the possibility that the person may end the interview at any stage if going further becomes too difficult.

# WHERE TO FIND EXPERTS ON TORTURE

- **International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims**  
Borgergade 13  
P.O. Box 9049 DK-1022  
Copenhagen K, Denmark  
Tel. +45 33 76 06 00  
Fax +45 33 76 05 00  
E-mail: [irct@irct.org](mailto:irct@irct.org)  
Web site: [www.irct.org](http://www.irct.org)
- **Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International (TASSC)**  
4121 Harewood Road NE ~ Suite B  
Washington, DC 20017  
Tel. 202-529-2991  
Fax 202-529-8334  
E-mail: [info@tassc.org](mailto:info@tassc.org)  
Web site: [www.tassc.org](http://www.tassc.org)
- **U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights**  
Geneva, Switzerland  
Office of the Spokesperson  
Tel. 0041 22 917 9242 or 0041 22 917 9602  
Email: [press-info@ohchr.org](mailto:press-info@ohchr.org)
- **Amnesty International (USA)**  
5 Penn Plaza - 14th floor  
New York, NY 10001  
Tel. 212-807-8400  
Fax 212-463-9193 or 212-627-1451  
E-mail: [admin-us@aiusa.org](mailto:admin-us@aiusa.org)  
Web site: [www.amnestyusa.org](http://www.amnestyusa.org)
- **Human Rights Watch**  
350 Fifth Avenue, 34th floor  
New York, NY 10118-3299 USA  
Tel. 212-290-4700  
Fax 212-736-1300  
E-mail: [hrwnyc@hrw.org](mailto:hrwnyc@hrw.org)  
Web site: [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)
- **Human Rights First**  
333 Seventh Avenue,  
13th Floor  
New York, NY 10001-5108  
Tel. 212-845-5274 or 212-845-5207  
Fax 212-845 5299  
Web site: [www.humanrightsfirst.org](http://www.humanrightsfirst.org)

# TORTURE REHABILITATION CENTERS IN UNITED STATES

- **Advocates for Survivors of Trauma and Torture (ASTT)**  
431 E. Belvedere  
Baltimore, MD 21212  
Tel. 410-464-9006  
E-mail: [klh@astt.org](mailto:klh@astt.org)
- **Amigos de los Sobrevivientes, Inc. (AMIGOS)**  
PO Box 50473  
Eugene, OR 97405  
Tel. 541-484-2450  
Fax 541-344-1149  
E-mail: [galbi@pacinfo.com](mailto:galbi@pacinfo.com)  
Web site: [www.pacinfo.clom/eugene/tsnet](http://www.pacinfo.clom/eugene/tsnet)
- **Bellevue NYU Program for Survivors of Torture**  
**NYU Medical Center** Division of Primary Care Medicine 16-S NB  
550 First Ave  
New York, NY 10016  
Tel. 212-263-8269  
Fax 212-263-8234  
E-mail: [ask45@aol.com](mailto:ask45@aol.com)
- **The Bosnian Mental Health Program**  
4750 N. Sheridan, Suite 300  
Chicago, IL 60640  
Tel. 773-271-1073  
Fax 773-2710601
- **Center for the Prevention and Resolution of Violence (CPRV)**  
PO Box 65720  
Tuscon, AZ 85728  
Tel. 520-628-7525  
Fax 520-797-8656
- **Center for Rehabilitation of Torture Victims**  
4247 Route 9 North, Bldg 1  
Freehold, NJ 07728  
Tel. 908-780-7650  
Fax 908-780-8817

- **Center for Survivors of Torture (CST)**  
1304 S. Hampton  
Dallas, TX 75208  
Tel. 214-330-3045  
Fax 214-331 7214  
E-mail: [g\\_hoper@venus.twu.edu](mailto:g_hoper@venus.twu.edu)
  
- **Center for Victims of Torture (CVT)**  
717 East River Road  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455  
Borgergade 13  
Tel. 612-626-1400  
Fax 612-626-2465  
E-mail: [mail@cvt.org](mailto:mail@cvt.org)  
Web site: [www.cvt.org](http://www.cvt.org)
  
- **Center for Victims of Torture**  
**John Salzberg, Washington Representative**  
605 G Street, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20024  
Tel. 202-484-0099  
Fax 202-424-0134
  
- **Community Counseling Services - Amanecer**  
145 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 100  
Los Angeles, CA 90017  
Tel. 213-481-1347  
Fax 213-481-1023
  
- **Consejo Counseling and Referral Service**  
3808 South Angeline Street  
Seattle, WA 98118  
Tel. 206-461-4880  
Fax 206-461-6989
  
- **Division of Primary Care Medicine**  
Department of Medicine, 16-S., New Bellevue  
NYU Medical Center  
550 1st Avenue  
New York, NY 10016  
Tel. 212-263-8269  
Fax 212-263-8234
  
- **The Healing Center for Survivors of Political Torture**  
California Institute of Integral Studies  
9 Peter Yorke Way  
San Francisco, CA 94109  
Tel. 415-241-1562  
Fax 415-703-7222  
E-mail: [terrilynz@aol.com](mailto:terrilynz@aol.com)

- **Human Rights Clinic**  
**Montefiore Medical Center**  
 c/o Department of Epidemiology and Social Medicine  
 Douglas Shenson, M.D.  
 111 E. 210th St.  
 Bronx, NY 10467  
 Tel. 718-920-4094  
 Fax 718-920-4989
- **Human Rights Clinic**  
**Doctors of the World**  
 375 West Broadway  
 New York NY 10012  
 Tel. 212-226-9890  
 Fax 212-226-7026  
 E-mail: [dow@igc.apc.org](mailto:dow@igc.apc.org)  
 Web site: [www.doctorsoftheworld.org](http://www.doctorsoftheworld.org)
- **Indochinese Psychiatry Clinic (IPC) at Deaconess Hospital**  
 Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center  
 One Deaconess Road  
 Boston, MA 02215  
 Tel. 617-496-5550 or 617 632 7722  
 Fax 617-496-5530 or 617 632 7721
- **Indochinese Psychiatric Program (IPP)**  
 Department of Psychiatry  
 Oregon Health Sciences University  
 3181 SW Sam Jackson Park Road, UHN-88  
 Portland, OR 97201-3098  
 Tel. 503-494-4222  
 Fax 503-494-6143
- **Institute for Survivors of Torture and Human Rights Abuses**  
 1438 W. Pratt #1  
 Chicago, IL 60626  
 Tel. 773-521-0750  
 Fax 773-381-9544
- **Institute for the Study of Psychopolitical Trauma (ISPT)**  
 Kaiser-Permanente Child Psychiatry Clinic  
 900 Lafayette St #200  
 Santa Clara, CA 95950  
 Tel. 408-342-6545  
 Fax 408-342-6540

- **International Mental Health Program (IMHP)**  
 640 Jackson Street  
 St. Paul, Minnesota 55101-2595  
 Tel. 612-291-4869  
 Fax 612-221-3801  
 E-mail: [Mark.D.Williams@HealthPartners.com](mailto:Mark.D.Williams@HealthPartners.com),  
[Patricia.f.Walker@HealthPartners.com](mailto:Patricia.f.Walker@HealthPartners.com)
- **Khmer Health Advocates**  
 29 Shadow Lane  
 Hartford, CT 06110  
 Tel. 860-561-3345  
 Fax 860-561-3538  
 E-mail: [mfx47@aol.com](mailto:mfx47@aol.com)
- **Marjorie Kovler Center for the Treatment of Survivors of Torture**  
 4750 N Sheridan Rd., Suite 300  
 Chicago, IL 60640  
 Tel. 773-271-6357  
 Fax 773-271-0601
- **Program for Torture Victims (PTV) Medical Services**  
 Venice Family Clinic  
 604 Rose Ave.  
 Venice, CA 90291  
 Tel. 562-494-5444  
 Fax 818-704-1352  
 E-mail: [jquirogamd@aol.com](mailto:jquirogamd@aol.com) or [adeutsch@ucla.edu](mailto:adeutsch@ucla.edu)
- **Refugee Clinic**  
 Harborview Medical Center  
 Box 359895  
 325 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
 Seattle, WA 98104  
 Tel. 206-731-4192 or 206-731-3381  
 Fax 206-731-8689  
 E-mail: [jacksonc@u.washington.edu](mailto:jacksonc@u.washington.edu)  
 Web site: [www.hslib.washington.edu/clinical/ethnomed](http://www.hslib.washington.edu/clinical/ethnomed)
- **Refugee Mental Health Access Project**  
 1547 Gaylord St, #100  
 Denver, CO 80206  
 Tel/ Fax 303-321-3234  
 E-mail: [rmsc@earthlink.net](mailto:rmsc@earthlink.net)

- **Refugee Trauma Services Project**  
 East Dallas Counseling Center  
 4306 Bryan Street  
 Dallas, TX 75204  
 Tel. 214-821-5393  
 Fax 214-821-0810
- **Rocky Mountain Survivor Program  
 Refugee Mental Health Access Project**  
 1547 Gaylord St. #100  
 Denver, CO 80206  
 Tel. 303-321 3221  
 Fax 303-321 3314  
 E-mail: [rmsc@earthlink.net](mailto:rmsc@earthlink.net)  
 Web site: [www.home.earthlink.net/~rmsc](http://www.home.earthlink.net/~rmsc)
- **Survivors International**  
 703 Market Street, Suite 301  
 San Francisco, California 94103  
 Tel. 415-546-2080  
 Fax 415-546-2084  
 E-mail: [survivors@survivorsintl.org](mailto:survivors@survivorsintl.org)  
 Web site: [www.survivorsintl.org](http://www.survivorsintl.org)
- **Survivors of Torture International**  
 P.O. Box 151240  
 San Diego, CA 92175  
 Tel. 619-582-9018  
 Fax 619-582-7103  
 E-mail: [surv.tort.intl@juno.com](mailto:surv.tort.intl@juno.com)
- **Tahirih Justice Center**  
 108 N. Virginia Avenue  
 Falls Church, VA 22046  
 Tel. 703-237-4554  
 Fax 703-237-4574  
 E-mail: [justice@tahirih.org](mailto:justice@tahirih.org)  
 Web site: <http://www.tahirih.org>
- **Travelers Aid/Victims Services  
 The Gathering Place- a Program for Survivors of Torture and Refugee  
 Trauma**  
 74-09 37th Avenue, Room 412  
 Jackson Heights, NY 11372  
 Tel. 718-899-1233  
 Fax 718-457-6071  
 E-mail: [326194@newschool.edu](mailto:326194@newschool.edu)

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