

Cognitive Interviewing

Cognitive interviewing is a memory retrieval procedure designed to enhance recall when interviewing a victim or witness. Unlike hypnosis, which involves placing the subject in an altered state of consciousness, cognitive interviewing relies on retrieving memories that are stored in different areas of the brain by cognitively stimulating various neural pathways. This phenomenon is familiar to all of us. A certain song, smell or taste may remind us of a memory long since forgotten. On the drive home from an unfamiliar location, seeing one familiar object oftentimes stimulates recall of upcoming buildings, intersections or landscapes that would not otherwise be remembered.

Introducing the Technique

Cognitive interviewing requires full cooperation on the part of the victim or witness and works best when that person is relaxed and in a private environment. The investigator should offer an explanation as to the basic theory of cognitive interviewing similar to the following:

"Sally, I'd like to go over this incident with you in a little different way. It's a technique called cognitive recall and will help you remember things easier. Have you ever heard a song on the radio and associated that song with a past boyfriend or maybe a vacation that you took with your family? You see, different parts of the brain respond to different stimuli. When we hear something, that sound is processed in a different area than when we see or touch something. No wall of these sensory areas are linked biologically to the top part of the brain which is where we store knowledge and memories. So rather than focusing on specific details, I'm going to ask some questions that will help stimulate memories. This works best when a person is completely relaxed so you may want to close your eyes. Simply listen to my questions, and tell me whatever comes to mind."

Stage I. Re-create Feelings or Strong Impressions of the Event

The interviewer should start by asking the victim or witness which one incident he or she best remembers. Following recall of the localized incident, the interviewer would ask specific questions to elicit sensory experiences of the incident such as, "How did you feel?" "What did you hear?" or, "What were you holding?" These questions are intended to stimulate different neural pathways; e.g., emotional, auditory, kinesthetic.

Stage II. Recollection of the Event

During this stage the victim or witness is asked to recall all the occurrences of the event in chronological order, regardless of apparent significance. This is a free flowing account without interruption to clarify points or to check accuracy. An example of this question may sound something like this: "Okay Sally. You were chewing gum and holding your

purse. You heard traffic sounds in the background and it was just starting to get dark. Tell me everything that happened from the beginning to the end once you left the building."

Following this recall, the interviewer would focus the witness' attention to certain aspects of the experience using past experience questions such as:

"Did the man remind you of anyone you know?"

"Did the man talk like anyone you know?"

"What do you think the man did for a living?"

"Did the man mention any names?"

"Did the man talk about any places?"

These types of questions may stimulate forgotten material in an indirect manner. For example, the victim may originally not be able to recall what the robber was wearing, but when asked what occupation he thinks the individual holds, the witness might state, "A delivery man." When asked who the person reminds him of, he may say, "The Rock." These answers are not to be interpreted literally, but rather serve as signal cues to assist recall. The "delivery man" answer may now allow the witness to remember that the robber was wearing coveralls. The reference to "The Rock" may stimulate the memory that the individual was very muscular.

Stage III. Reversal Recall of the Event

During this stage the victim or witness is asked to recall, in reverse order, what happened during the event. It is sometimes practical at this stage to start the witness out at a significant event and work backwards from that event. The following is a suggested way to introduce this question:

"What I'd like you to do now is to tell me everything that happened in reverse order, like playing a videotape backwards. You are lying down on the ground of the parking lot. Tell me everything that happened in reverse order."

Stage IV. Recall the Incident from Another Person's Perspective

By asking the witness to relay the incident from another person's perspective, further memories may be stimulated. In a homicide case, for example, the witness may be asked to relate what he thinks the victim saw and heard. In the victim example we've been using, Sally may be asked to tell the story from the eyes of the person who attacked her (or was standing across the parking lot).

Conclusions

In situations where a victim or witness is cooperative and relatively untraumatized,

cognitive interviewing techniques should produce more accurate and greater amounts of information than traditional questioning techniques. It does not have the courtroom restrictions of hypnotically induced evidence, and yet may reveal memories not retrievable through other means. On the other hand, hypnosis or other techniques should not be ruled out when cognitive interviewing procedures are ineffective.

For additional information see The Cognitive Interview method of conducting police interviews: Eliciting extensive information and promoting Therapeutic Jurisprudence by Ronald Fisher and R. Edward Geiselman at <http://www.cti-home.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Cognitive-Interview-Method-Fisher-Geiselman.pdf>