

A TOOLKIT CREATED BY A  
SURVIVOR-CENTERED RESEARCH TEAM

# You Are An Expert: Research Collaborations for Survivors

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# INTRODUCTION

# Introduction

We are members of the Human-Centered Action Research to Disrupt Trafficking (HART) survivor-centered research team and have been working in partnership with university-trained researchers in the social sciences and engineering for over seven years. We believe that survivor researchers are critical experts in anti-trafficking research and their role should not be minimized, ignored, or marginalized.

Throughout the years, we have learned together how to create and sustain research teams that equally value lived experience expertise and academic expertise. We wanted to share the things we have learned through this process with other survivors who may be considering partnering with academics in research.

You can read more about our full HART team and how we work together at our website:  
<https://sites.google.com/view/hart-research-center/>

## Toolkit Purpose

We hope that survivors who are not university-trained researchers but who are considering research will use this toolkit to determine how to engage in research in a way that is empowering, supportive, trauma-informed, and helpful in healing and professional development.



## Toolkit Structure

The toolkit provides an overview to four important considerations for survivors that are interested in pursuing research:

1. What is Research?
2. Assessing the “University-Trained” Researchers
3. Defining Your Engagement with Research
4. Ensuring Your Personal Wellness

## ***Our Major Takeaways***



### **You are an expert!**

Embrace your expertise and be confident in what you bring to the team.



### **Ensure trauma-informed processes**

The team should be trauma-informed and recognize how survivors have gained their expertise, without being patronizing.



### **Set your boundaries**

You get to set your boundaries. You are there for your expertise and not to share your personal experiences, unless you choose to do so.



### **Trust takes time**

Building the trust necessary to work together as people from different backgrounds takes time and intention.



### **Embrace self-care**

This work is hard, can trigger trauma, and is exhausting. Know when to step away both in the moment and over the long term.

## INTRODUCTION

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# ***Our Team History & Accomplishments***

In 2018, Tonique, Terry, Joy, and Christine began as part of the survivor-centered advisory group to the “Modeling Operations of Sex Trafficking (MOST)” research project. The MOST project was funded by the National Science Foundation and led by Dr. Lauren Martin at the University of Minnesota, in partnership with Dr. Kelle Barrick (RTI International), Dr. Kayse Lee Maass (Northeastern University) and Dr. Thomas Sharkey (Clemson University). One of the key questions that the MOST project wanted to answer was whether university-trained researchers from different backgrounds, such as social science and engineering, could work with survivors and other survivor-centered practitioners in a way that all expertise would be equally valued, and if so, how to create such teams. Several of us knew Lauren from her past research and we knew that we could trust her to respect and value our expertise, so we agreed to meet the other university-trained researchers.

The whole team spent a lot of time getting to know each other, building trust, discussing our team values, and learning how to work with people with different types of expertise. Our team worked together for almost 2 years before our first public presentation and 4 years before publishing our first journal article. The trust-building process was really important since it helped us to understand who the university-trained researchers on the team were as people.

In 2020, Mikki joined the team and in January 2021 we launched two additional projects focusing on modeling effective network disruptions (MEND) and disrupting recruitment networks (MEND-R). During the COVID-19 pandemic we transitioned our team meetings to remote meetings, which allowed the entire project team to meet more frequently and be more collaborative. These meetings helped us see how the university-trained researchers were valuing our expertise and integrating it into their fields.



## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 7 years, the entire team has grown together, recognizing that we were not an advisory group in the traditional sense, but that we have been active researchers on the team since we joined it. We now refer to ourselves as the survivor-centered research team, which better reflects our contributions as co-equal research partners.

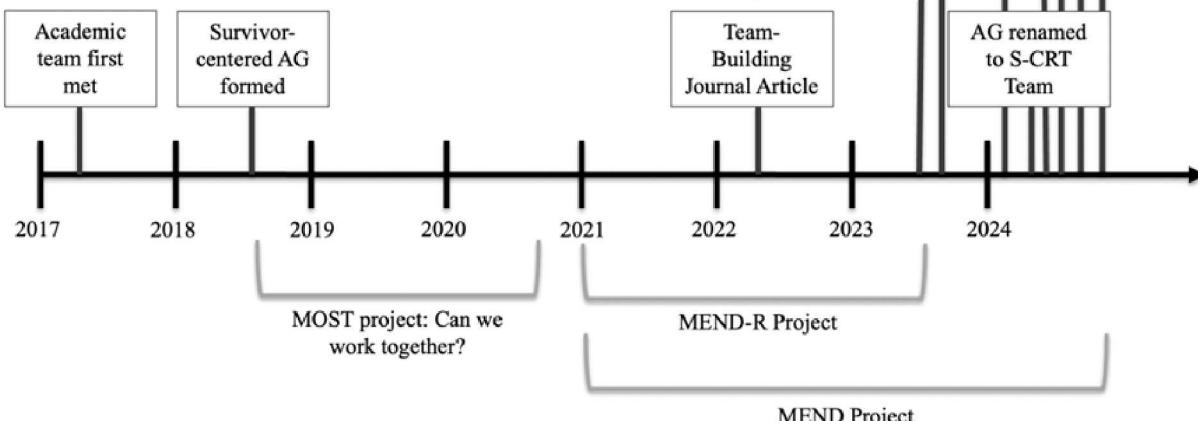
As of September 2025, we have been part of three funded research projects (MOST, MEND, MEND-R), helped host a research workshop to identify gaps in anti-trafficking literature; gave presentations on our research to the U.S. Department of State, the National Institute of Justice research community, at the JuST conference of Shared Hope, and at the International Human Trafficking and Social Justice Conference; co-authored two published research articles (with more coming!); co-authored one report to the National Institute of Justice; created a video to disseminate our work; and are founding research investigators of the Human-Centered Action Research to Disrupt Trafficking (HART) team. A timeline of our work is presented below.

### Research Projects Mentioned

**MOST:** *EAGER: ISN: Modeling Operations of Human Trafficking Networks for Effective Interdiction. National Science Foundation Grant No. 1838315*

**MEND:** *D-ISN: TRACK 1: Modeling Effective Network Disruptions for Human Trafficking. National Science Foundation Grant No. 2039584*

**MEND-R:** *Identification of Effective Strategies to Disrupt Recruitment of Victims in Human Trafficking: Qualitative Data, Systems Modeling, Survivors and Law Enforcement. National Institute of Justice. Grant No. 2020-MU-MU-0040*





# WHAT IS RESEARCH?

# What is Research?

**RESEARCH** is a *systematic* investigation to establish truths and facts and help reach conclusions.

Research often starts with a **RESEARCH QUESTION** and applies a method to answer the question. Different types of methods may be applied.



**QUANTITATIVE METHODS**  
use math and apply it to  
numeric data to answer  
research questions.



**QUALITATIVE METHODS**  
answer research questions  
using non-numeric data like  
interviews or text.

**MIXED METHODS**  
combines the two!

## Guidelines

Research is a process for learning more about the world and answering questions that don't yet have clear answers. In anti-trafficking research, survivors bring knowledge, insights, and perspectives that make the work stronger and more accurate. Here are four key ideas to keep in mind:

### **Sharing Your Expertise, Not Your Story**

As a survivor, you bring deep knowledge about how trafficking works—not just a personal story. Other members of the research team should value your expertise and insights, not only your trauma or personal story. **You may choose** to share parts of your story, but you should never feel pressured to do so. Think of it like this: Imagine someone asks you about a restaurant you know well. You can describe what's on the menu and how it operates—without ever talking about your personal experiences in the restaurant or what dishes you've tried. You might choose to include your personal experience, but you don't have to when you are describing the restaurant. That's how research works too.

### **Critical Thinking**

In research, critical thinking means being able to take a step back from your own personal experiences in order to look at the bigger picture. This doesn't mean your story doesn't matter—it does. But when doing research, it's important to think about patterns, systems, and experiences beyond your own. This helps make sure that the findings reflect a wider range of survivor experiences, and not just one person's story. By doing this, researchers—including survivors—help reduce bias in the research. That means the results are more accurate, inclusive, and useful for making change. This way of thinking and talking about trafficking can be emotionally difficult, especially when it touches on things you've lived through. That's why it's essential to have a support system, self-care practices, and people you can talk to. Taking care of yourself is part of doing good research.



## Learning Other People's Communication Styles & "Languages"

Researchers often have their own way of talking about trafficking. You might hear terms you don't usually use—or that don't feel quite right. For example, you might say "pimp" while other researchers on the team might say "trafficker." It's important to learn the language used in research, but also to speak up about the words you prefer and why. Together, the team can figure out what terms make sense for everyone and still describe the work clearly.



## Research Blends Ideas

Research works best when people with different backgrounds, experiences, and ways of thinking come together to learn from each other. Survivors, university-trained researchers, and others all bring something unique to the table. Strong research teams don't just allow for different perspectives—they actively blend them. This means working together to decide what questions to ask, how to study them, and how to make sense of the answers. Your ideas and insights are just as important as anyone else's. The goal is to combine everyone's strengths to create research that's more thoughtful, more accurate, and more powerful.

## *Perspectives*

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Be authentic with what you are bringing to research. You have different expertise and you should know it is as important as everyone else's expertise.

”

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*Survivor Researcher*

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“

As we go on this journey together, we are all in different spaces, we are all bringing something to the team and we are all learning from each other.

”

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*University-Trained Researcher*

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# Assessing the "University- Trained" Researchers

# Assessing the “University-Trained” Researchers

When you join a research project, you are not just saying yes to the topic —you are saying yes to the people.

Some of these people may be university-trained researchers, meaning that they have received research training through universities or colleges. Some university-trained researchers may have a lot of experience working with survivors, while others may be engaging with survivor expertise for the very first time. Even if a researcher has worked with survivors before, that does not always mean they do so in a way that aligns with your values, respects your boundaries, or incorporates your feedback. This is why it is important to pay close attention to how the researchers show up.

## Potential Risks to Survivors

While being on a research team can be meaningful, it also has risks such as:

- Retriggering trauma
- Imbalanced pay or recognition
- Violated boundaries, especially around your story
- Lack of support from the team

Recognizing these risks early allows you to ask the right questions before joining.

## Trust Takes Time

Safety and trust cannot be rushed. Researchers who want survivor partnership need to understand that trust is built through consistency, respect, and honesty—not just one good meeting.

## Guidelines

When joining a research team, it's important to know whether the people you'll be working with are respectful, supportive, and committed to centering survivor expertise. The questions and signs below can help you decide if a team is a good match for you.

### **Do They Use Trauma-Informed Processes?**

A trauma-informed team understands how trafficking can have lasting effects, and they take steps to avoid causing additional harm. Look for teams that:

- Recognize trauma is real and valid, and make space for genuine feelings and emotions.
- Be supportive if you want to opt out of or take a break from the process.
- Understand if you don't want to answer certain questions.
- Let survivors set the pace and depth of discussions within established boundaries.
- Create positive, healing-centered experiences rather than retraumatizing ones.

### **Do They Respect Survivor Expertise and Adapt to Feedback?**

A strong research team values the different forms of knowledge each person brings—lived experience, professional training, and everything in between. You should feel encouraged to ask questions about traditional research methods, just as they ask you about trafficking. Mutual curiosity and respect are essential.

Part of respecting survivor expertise is listening when you share feedback, especially about language. University-trained researchers might use terms that don't feel right to survivors. Pay attention to how they respond when you suggest changes: do they welcome the conversation, or get defensive?

For example, in our own work, the university-trained researchers used the terms "high-end commercial sex market" and "low-end commercial sex market" to refer to differences in pricing. We survivors pointed out that these phrases could make it sound like victims or survivors were "high-end" or "low-end," which was not the intent. The team appreciated this feedback and we decided together to change the wording to "street-based commercial sex market," which more accurately reflected the market segment. A good team will be open to learning from you and making adjustments that make the research more respectful and accurate.



## Do They Create a Safe Space for Brainstorming?

Research is about generating new knowledge, which means no one knows all the answers. It's normal to share incomplete ideas or ask questions that do not lead anywhere. A good team will:

- Encourage all ideas without judgment.
- Value your contributions even when they are still forming.
- See brainstorming as a shared process, not a test.



## Do They Support Self-Care and Healthy Boundaries?

Human trafficking research can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. The right team will:

- Normalize taking breaks from the work.
- Establish and cultivate boundaries in conversations to avoid over-sharing or retriggering conversations.
- Respect when you need to step away.
- Offer resources or practices, such as mindfulness and breathing exercises, to help the whole team re-center before and after difficult discussions.



## Do They Recognize and Respect What Survivors Should Receive?

A trustworthy team ensures survivors receive:

- **Credit** - You are part of the team. Your name is included in publications and presentations (when you agree to it).
- **Compensation** - You are compensated at a rate that recognizes your expertise and time is valuable. For example, if you are consulting on a federal grant, then you receive the maximum allowable hourly rate for federal consultants. Research projects have different requirements or norms for compensation based on their funding source, but you can ask for transparent information about this.
- **Privacy** - Your privacy is always respected. Information that you share confidentially should not be shared by the research team. There are appropriate guidelines for how the team shares your contact information. Others respect that your story (if shared) is yours and that just because you shared it with the team, does not mean you are giving the team permission to share it with others.
- **Safety** - You always feel physically and emotionally safe. There is a clear way to report any unsafe situations.
- **Support** - Resources are offered during the research process. The team helps you grow professionally, such as by supporting your participation in presentations.

## *Perspectives*

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Researchers should understand their positionality and power dynamics using trauma-informed approaches - asking, not assuming, offering choice, never rushing, understanding triggers, and creating emotional safety.

”

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*Survivor Researcher*

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“

Our team recognizes that transformative work requires honoring each person's unique experience, moving at the speed of trust, and deeply knowing and seeing each other's humanity. At every step, we strive to remain inclusive in our practice, and, always, grounded in care.

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*University-Trained Researcher*

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# Defining Your Engagement with Research

# Defining Your Engagement with Research

Every survivor's involvement in research is unique.

How, and if, you choose to engage depends on your goals, comfort level, and the kind of support you need.

## ***Why It's Important:***

Clear communication about the team's expectations, responsibilities, and boundaries fosters trust, helps prevent misunderstandings and creates a supportive environment for everyone.

Defining your engagement can help set clear boundaries, avoid burnout, and make the most of your expertise.

## ***What It Is:***

Defining your engagement is *not just about saying yes or no*. It's about creating a research partnership that values your expertise, respects your limits, and supports your growth.

## ***Tip: Talk to your support system.***

Discuss your participation with someone you trust outside the research team to help process experiences or decisions.

# Guidelines

When you join a research team, it's important to be clear about what your role will look like—how much time you'll spend, how you'll be involved, and how your contributions will be recognized. Clear agreements, in writing, help everyone stay on the same page and prevent misunderstandings.

## Setting Clear Expectations

You will likely not be doing research full-time, so it's important to agree on what your workload will look like and when the work will happen. For example:

- Will the team meet once a month, or more often?
- If the other team members need you to read something before a meeting, when will you receive it, and how much time will it take?
- What happens if you can't meet a deadline due to personal or professional commitments?

Being mindful of your workload will help you manage your capacity to commit to the team. A supportive team will recognize that sometimes unexpected situations come up that require flexibility if you are unable to meet a deadline.

## Engagement and Compensation

It's important that your compensation matches the amount of time and expertise you are contributing to the project. If your role involves a significant time commitment, your pay must reflect that. For example, if you are consulting on a federal grant, you should receive the maximum allowable hourly rate for *every hour you work on the project*. Agree on compensation up front so expectations are clear for everyone, including clear limits on expected hours to avoid unintentional overwork or budget strain.

## Seeing Your Influence in the Research

Part of staying engaged is knowing your input matters. It is important for engagement that you clearly see how your ideas, critiques, and feedback are shaping the research. Your contributions are important and should be respected. For example, if you raised a concern in one meeting, the next meeting ought to reflect how the team considered or incorporated your feedback.



## Effective and Respectful Meetings

Because everyone on the team is busy—especially survivor researchers who may have other jobs or responsibilities—meetings **should** be focused, purposeful, and respectful of people's time. If meetings do not feel effective or relevant to you, it's okay to raise that concern with the team—or to adjust your level of involvement.

### Example Meeting Agenda Template

Below is one example of how we structure our meetings. This format works well for our team, but your group may decide on a different approach that better meets your team's needs.

1. **Check-ins** – A quick round of check-ins to see how everyone is doing and answer any questions about the meeting.
2. **Research Progress Check** – A brief overview of work completed since the last meeting.
3. **Meeting Goal** – Clarify the main focus of the meeting and what the team hopes to accomplish.
4. **Deep Dive into Research** – Focused discussion or activity to advance the research and achieve the meeting goal.
5. **Debrief and Wrap-up** – Recap the meeting and discuss next steps. We check-in with each other about how we are feeling or any last thoughts we have. We end each meeting with a guided breathing meditation to re-center ourselves.



## Reflect and Reassess Regularly

Regularly take time to check in with yourself about your engagement. Ask questions like: *Am I feeling supported and valued? Am I comfortable with my level of involvement? Is this work impacting my well-being?* Reflection helps you notice when boundaries need adjusting, identify areas where you may want more or less participation, and ensure that your contribution continues to feel meaningful and safe. It is okay to decide you no longer want to be part of the research team. Notifying your team you no longer want to be involved is adequate.

## *Perspectives*

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“ Know what you can actually commit to without burning yourself out, do not burn the candle from both ends, be realistic in the time that you have to contribute. ”

———— *Survivor Researcher* ————

“ Lived expertise is EXPERTISE. Survivors should be paid for their expertise, just as other team members are paid for their expertise. ”

———— *University-Trained Researcher* ————

# Ensuring Your Personal Wellness

# Ensuring Your Personal Wellness

Prioritizing wellness is not a separate task.  
It is part of how you engage in research meaningfully.

By protecting your health and emotional safety, you create space to contribute fully, stay empowered, and ensure your participation supports your healing.

Wellness in research is about more than avoiding harm.  
It's about creating conditions where you feel supported, respected, and empowered to engage on your own terms.

The most critical thing  
**the team can do**  
to support your wellness is to establish norms that people can step away at any time and to have a process that helps identify when a topic is getting too heavy for you.

The most critical thing  
**you can do**  
to support your wellness is to step away when things become too much.

## Trust Yourself

Your feelings, boundaries, and reactions are valid.  
Speak up, step back, or adjust your involvement as needed.  
A good team will respect your decisions.

# Guidelines

Your health, safety, and emotional well-being always comes first. Research can be exciting and meaningful, but it can also be challenging—especially when it involves topics connected to your own experiences. These guidelines can help you protect your wellness while engaging in research.

## **Make Sure You Are Ready**

Research can require you to view your trafficking experiences from a more objective, analytical perspective. This can be difficult and emotionally challenging. Therefore, it's best to wait until you are no longer in survival mode and your basic needs are met before joining a research team. Never feel rushed into a research opportunity if it might risk your healing and recovery.

## **Be Clear About Your Role and Its Impact**

Having conversations with the other research team members to understand exactly how they expect you to be involved and what kind of work you will be doing will help clarify expectations for your role. Once you understand your role, take time to think about how this work could affect your emotional well-being. You are the best judge of whether this engagement supports your healing—or risks it.

## **Set Boundaries that Work for You**

You decide how and when you interact with others on the research team. You might choose to communicate only through email and scheduled meetings, or you might feel comfortable giving your phone number and receiving texts or calls. You might decide to share parts of your personal life, or you might keep all conversations strictly work-related. It is completely up to you what boundaries you set. A great team will be respectful of your boundaries and not pressure you to change them. At the same time, every research project also has its own parameters—for example, if attending team meetings is essential, the group will need to determine together whether alternative arrangements are possible. A great team will also be clear about the requirements of the work so everyone can participate successfully.



### **Remember That Nobody Has All the Answers**

Research is about exploring questions, trying ideas, and sometimes being wrong before finding the right path. It's not like a school test where you either know the "correct" answer or you don't. It's perfectly okay to say you don't understand something, ask for clarification, or raise questions. Curiosity is a strength in research. It's good to be curious and to ask questions.



### **Step Away When You Need To**

If the research process, meetings, or discussions are causing you stress or discomfort, feel free to step away—temporarily or permanently. A healthy team will understand and support you in prioritizing your own wellness.

## *Perspectives*

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“ I knew that we could stop and we do not have to go there from the very beginning. The team explained that the project may be triggering and just because you committed to the team does not mean you have to answer every question. ”

———— *Survivor Researcher* ————

“ Most university-trained researchers rarely focus on the personal wellness of researchers, research staff, partners and research participants. But, I've learned that by paying attention to the full humanness of all contributors - and intentionally developing supportive processes - we can build knowledge together through connection, not abstraction or extraction. ”

———— *University-Trained Researcher* ————



# How This Toolkit Was Created

## How This Toolkit Was Created

This toolkit was created over the course of several months and through multiple group discussions. We began by identifying and reviewing existing toolkits related to human trafficking research and survivor involvement. Most of these resources were designed for university-trained researchers and organizations, offering guidance on how to engage with survivors or make their organizations more survivor-informed. What we noticed, however, was a gap: there were few resources created specifically by survivors, for survivors—tools to help survivors think through whether they might want to become involved as research partners. We also wanted to share the insights we have gained through our seven years of working together. After reviewing the existing toolkits, we turned to brainstorming what additional information might be helpful for survivors, based on our collective experience in research. Through many conversations, feedback sessions, and revisions, this toolkit took shape. We hope that it comes to life in the work of future teams.

### **We are grateful for the support of the HART team in this process:**

- **Kayse Lee Maass** helped summarize our ideas into guidelines, edited the toolkit, and converted the content into a graphic design.
- **Lauren Martin** helped to obtain funding for the project.
- **Christina Melander** designed the process for us to brainstorm what should be included in the toolkit and facilitated the brainstorming.
- **Tom Sharkey** helped summarize our ideas into guidelines, provided an initial draft of the toolkit, and helped obtain funding for the project.
- **Vanessa Voller** took extensive notes during discussions and helped translate our conversations into guidelines.

## ***A Note from the University-Trained Researchers on Our Team:***

Our role in developing this toolkit was to help translate the expertise of the survivor-centered research team members into a format that could be shared with others. The knowledge and insights belong to them—we just helped create a pathway for it to take shape in this format. Our role was to help accelerate the process by organizing, summarizing, and formatting the ideas of the survivor-centered researchers.

**Although we supported the process, the knowledge and vision in this toolkit are not ours to claim. They originate with the survivor-centered research team.**

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*Kayse Lee Maass, Lauren Martin, Christina Melander,  
Thomas Sharkey, and Vanessa Voller*

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