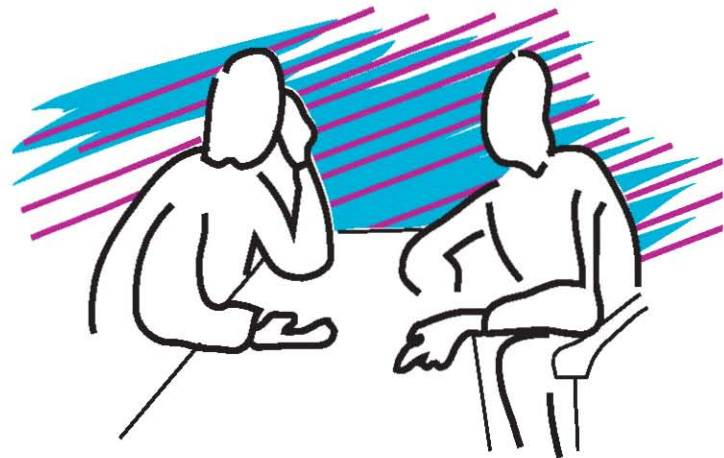


# National Drug Abuse Treatment Clinical Trials Network

## General Interviewing Guidelines

For more information on the National Drug Abuse Treatment Clinical Trials Network visit the NIDA website at [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

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**NIDA** NATIONAL INSTITUTE  
ON DRUG ABUSE

## Conducting Standardized Assessments:

- If it is necessary to get clarification or additional information, repeat the question before providing clarification. Ask neutral questions such as *“Can you tell me what you mean by that?”* Restate the participant’s answer and ask for clarification.
- Consider pausing and using silence to collect more information.
- Whenever possible do not accept “I don’t know” as an answer. Probe for more information, but do not force the issue.
- If more than one answer is possible, inquire for additional responses until the participant explicitly states there are no more answers to be given.
- If the interview goes on for an extended time, allow for breaks to keep the participant and yourself fresh and alert.

## General Guidelines:

Many research participants have difficult lives including multiple health problems, unstable living conditions, and limited support systems. Consequently, the relationship established with the interviewer is often as important as any material incentives provided in preventing study attrition. It is important that study participants feel respected and welcomed by the research staff. Research assistants must conduct themselves in a professional and ethical manner and should:

- Convey a professional, confident and caring attitude toward participants.
- Respect the dignity and protect the welfare of research participants.
- Set clear and appropriate boundaries that are maintained at all times.
- Avoid entering into any dual relationships with a past or present participant.
- Inform a supervisor if you identify a pre-existing relationship with a participant.

## Conducting Standardized Assessments:

In substance abuse research it is often necessary to collect data of a sensitive nature, including sexual preferences and practices, past and present drug use, trauma, childhood experiences, psychological and financial issues. Research staff should be comfortable with the information they will be collecting and not appear uneasy.

*Remember, you are not a therapist or counselor to the participants.*

If the participant expresses issues or problems and wants to speak with a counselor, offer to contact his/her therapist or make a referral for services.

Asking interview questions needs to be done in a very specific and consistent manner:

- Read questions slowly and clearly.
- Ask questions exactly as they are written.
- Ask questions exactly in the order they appear.
- Ask every question unless a skip pattern is established.
- Use the introductory or transitional phrases as written.
- Repeat the question exactly as written if the participant does not understand it.
- If clarification is needed do not offer potential answers.
- Avoid suggesting answers to questions.
- Explain that some questions are asked more than one time or are very similar, however, participants must answer all questions.
- Explain that some questions may not apply to them but they should answer all questions.



# Confidentiality and Privacy:

*During the course of the assessments participants may behave in sexually inappropriate manners.*

- Do not ignore sexually inappropriate behaviors.
- Set boundaries and limitations.
- Convey in a clear firm manner that the behavior is not appropriate or acceptable.
- Set a limit and consequence and follow through.
- If you feel any danger, stop the interview.
- Report the behavior to your supervisor as soon as possible.

It is important to protect the confidentiality of participants at all times. Participants need to be certain that their privacy and identity will be protected to the extent allowed by law or statute.

- Never put the participant's name on data forms, use only the ID numbers.
- Keep the links between identifying information and participant IDs separate from study materials in a different location.
- Do not speak of study participants with people outside of study staff, unless required by law or ethical obligation.
- Think before you answer any questions about a participant's involvement in a study. Do not confirm or deny a person's participation to anyone not involved in the study.

*(continued)*

### *Exceptions to Confidentiality:*

Research staff must abide by local, state, and national laws regarding the reporting of participant information. Laws may vary by state, so staff must be aware of their reporting obligations by site. However, confidentiality must be broken if there is a clear threat that the participant may hurt himself/herself or threatens the life of another person. In addition, many states have laws requiring reporting in cases of child or elder abuse or neglect. Become familiar with these regulations. If you encounter a situation that you feel requires you to break confidentiality, share the information with your supervisor immediately and follow site procedures.

**Suicidal or depressed** participants will be encountered in drug abuse research studies. It is important to be aware of the policies of your center on dealing with such participants. Some general guidelines include:

- Be aware of warning signs and expressions of depression or suicide.
- Ask the person if they are thinking of hurting or killing themselves (it will not cause them to follow through).
- Remain calm and consider the need for immediate intervention.
- Consult your supervisor as soon as possible.
- If you feel it is unsafe for the participant to leave without speaking with a counselor or therapist, set up a consultation as soon as possible.

## Dealing with difficult participants:

- Consider the possibility of adjusting the protocol requirements to accommodate the participant, however, consult with the Principal Investigator before promising anything.
- Ask the participant if the interview can be rescheduled for a better day/time of the participant, and put off the final decision to terminate from the study until a later date.
- Have study assessments prioritized prior to interviews to ensure capturing critical information first—in case you are only able to complete a portion of the interview/assessments.
- Ask the participant if before they make the final decision to withdraw from the study, they would take some time and allow you to contact them in the future (e.g, 1-3 months later, depending on protocol) to see if their decision has changed. If not, they can be withdrawn at that time.

## Interviewer Safety:

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Research staff should make efforts to provide a comfortable environment for the research participant that is safe for both the staff and participants.

### ***Some general rules include:***

- Arrange the room so that the research assistant sits closest to the door.
- Create a comfortable distance between the staff and participant.
- Make sure other staff members are aware of when and where an interview is taking place.
- Ensure other staff members are in the office/building when an interview is taking place.

### ***For off site interviews:***

- Conduct all interviews with at least 2 staff people whenever possible.
- Always inform the supervisor and someone at the program of where the interview will be and how long you will be there.
- Call your office/site when you are leaving/have left the visit.
- Visit during daylight hours, whenever possible.



## Guidelines For Appropriate Interactions:

**Listening** to a participant requires hearing the words, but also considering other forms of communication. Research assistants must be aware of body language, tone of voice, level of vocabulary and language differences. Asking for clarification may be necessary, but it is important not to ask in a leading manner. Instead, rephrase the participant's comment and ask for more information, or provide a definition of a specific term or behavior.

It is important that research assistants establish clear **boundaries and limits** for the interviews. Research assistants should never provide personal information about themselves. Should participants push for information, staff should respond respectfully, but clearly, that they are not permitted to share personal information. Use good eye contact and speak in a clear voice. Stick to facts, guidelines and the research protocol.

## Dealing with difficult participants:

When a participant appears **angry or aggressive**, speak calmly and reassuringly. Use two-part sentences that empathize but set limits. Respect the participant's personal space. Always trust your feelings and remove yourself from the room if you feel unsafe. Contact a supervisor or therapist immediately if this happens.

Research staff will encounter participants who are **resistant to continuing in the research study** at times. If a participant is unhappy with their research experience, research staff must respect their wishes to discontinue study participation. However, efforts should be made to work with the participant to keep them in the study.

- Resistant participants are likely to be depressed, anxious, and overwhelmed by events in their lives. Staff should maintain a supportive and encouraging environment.
- Remind the participant that dropping out diminishes the quality of information for the study and makes it hard to draw conclusions about the helpfulness of the treatment.