

CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE AND RESPECTFUL IN-DEPTH, SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

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Extreme events disrupt the lives of people, can have a significant impact on their mental and physical health, and may increase personal and professional pressures. Conducting interviews under these conditions can be difficult for the researcher, but also potentially stressful for the interviewee. It is therefore important that as a researcher you are mindful and respectful in the way you conduct the interview. It is also critical to carefully consider the types of questions you use to explore your topic of interest and how you engage with the interviewee. This check sheet offers a number of tips for how you can most effectively engage with disaster-affected individuals and communities.

- When conducting interviews, it is imperative to remember that the interviewee and their community are currently experiencing a distressing situation. Interviewees may be under significant stress, feel vulnerable, and may be emotionally charged or drained as a result of an extreme event. Exercising empathy, kindness, and patience in your communication style—over email, telephone, or in person—will help respondents feel comfortable and can elicit rich descriptive responses.
- Remember, it is important to collect good data for your research, but also to acknowledge that these are real people who are going through significant upheaval. This means that you should always treat your participants with respect and compassion during the research process. Below is a list of tips and techniques you can use to help each interviewee feel comfortable and build a sense of trust and respect. This will ultimately facilitate a better experience for both you and the participant.
 - **Acknowledgment:** After introductions, acknowledge and thank the interviewee for their time and participation amidst a disaster. It is important that you acknowledge from the beginning that you understand that this may be a difficult time and that you offer gratitude for their involvement in the study.
 - **Active Listening:** Demonstrate that you are actively listening to your interviewee through occasional nods, facial expressions, or small comments such as a “yes” or other acknowledgements. Show you are listening by reflecting back what they have shared with you. This can be done by incorporating earlier information to help build the next question or probe, such as “So, what I hear you saying is...” or “Earlier you mentioned X, next can you tell me a little more about...”.
 - **Body Language:** Your physical behaviors, such as facial expression, body posture, gestures, and eye contact, should create a comfortable environment. Avoid crossed arms, or looking around the room. Also, avoid putting the interviewee in a position where they may feel trapped. For instance, if you are conducting the interview in a small office, avoid blocking the exit or backing the interviewee into a corner. Be respectful of personal space.
 - **Composure:** During the interview, it is important to remain calm and composed throughout the process. Maintaining a calm demeanor can help participants feel more at ease and can help reduce tensions or emotions from rising. With that said, empathy and feelings—appropriately displayed—can be helpful and are a normal response in disaster research.

- **Dress Code/Attire:** Consider where the interview is taking place, when it is taking place, and who the interviewee is, and then dress appropriately. Your interviewee should feel comfortable around you. Consider your setting: a suit may be appropriate for a professional office, while jeans and a simple top may be appropriate for a community organization, or hiking boots and a vest if you will be in the wilderness.
- **Setting:** Ensure the setting is a place where the interviewee feels comfortable and can talk without fear of being overheard. Try to select a setting that is free of distractions or loud noises, is convenient for the interviewee, and feels safe for you both.
- **Situational Awareness:** Read the situation and adjust as necessary. Pay attention to how the interview is going and how the interviewee seems to be feeling. It is okay and encouraged to take pauses or a break, come back to a question later, reschedule the interview, or even cancel the interview outright if it becomes too challenging for the interviewee (particularly under extreme conditions). If appropriate, you also may want to be prepared with a list of resources that may be helpful to respondents given current conditions.
- **Interviewer Self-Care:** Even as you are working to ensure the well-being of your interviewee, it is also important to remember that conducting disaster research can be emotionally draining and trying in many ways. For more information and support, consider taking the [CONVERGE Conducting Emotionally Challenging Research Training Module](#).

Research is an iterative process and a learning experience for both the interviewee and the interviewer. Indeed, the story that comes from the interview is ultimately a co-production between you and the interviewee. How you choose to interact with the interviewee will impact the outcome of your research. Recognizing that a disaster, by its very definition, is highly disruptive, and exercising empathy, patience, and understanding during your interview is an important component of successful and ethical research.

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