

## COLLECT MEANINGFUL DATA: Conducting One-on-One Interviews

**Purpose:** One-on-one interviews are a useful method for collecting qualitative (non-numeric) data (see the *Beyond Numbers: Collecting Qualitative Data* emPower Tool). Interviews are a great tool for collecting data that needs to go deeper into a topic—data with context and nuance, and in the words of the people you interview, rather than the person writing a survey. Interviews can be used to evaluate a program, explore the impacts of an intervention, or more deeply understand staff needs. After you conduct one-on-one interviews, you can analyze the recorded interviews and written interview notes using qualitative data analysis (see the *Analyzing Qualitative Data* emPower Tool).

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### What is a 1-on-1 Interview?

Guided, intentional conversations between you and someone who has relevant experience with your program, like a client, service provider, or employee.

It is good practice to make an audio recording of each interview and then transcribe the recording into written words so you can analyze the conversation.

#### Key concepts of the method:

- Interviews highlight individual experiences, feelings, motivations, and interpretations.
- Interview data dives deep where surveys and statistics skim the surface.
- Interviews are an interactive, instead of one-sided, process of data collection.

### Why use 1-on-1 Interviews?

- Survey and statistical data tell you “what,” “when,” and “where,” whereas one-on-one interviews answer “how” and “why”.
- One-on-one interviews can both support quantitative findings and contradict them (in good ways!) by bringing to light particularities of individual experience.
- Interviews answer questions that simply cannot be answered via statistics and surveys.
- Unlike with large surveys and statistics, you can follow up with interviewees and ask them whether findings from statistics, surveys, and interviews are in line with their experiences.

## Conducting a One-on-One Interview Project



### Have a Clear Research Question

Qualitative data is often collected in order to answer questions that cannot be answered by quantitative data OR is inspired by findings in quantitative data that require more exploration. Before starting this process, narrow your focus down to a specific question you want the data to answer.

### Develop an Interview Guide

A one-on-one interview is intended to feel as much like a normal conversation as possible, while guided by the research question. To ensure you touch on all of the topics, it is good practice to use an interview guide, which is a bullet list of themes or prompts to ask the participant.

- DO include a list of demographic questions (race, gender, etc.) at the beginning.
- DO print the interview guide so you can take interview notes in addition to the audio recording.
- DO NOT be afraid to let the conversation veer off a bit. Use the guide to rein it back in.



### Recruit Participants

Identify: 1) the most appropriate participants to interview, 2) how many people you need to interview, and 3) how you will account for a diversity of participants.

- DO consider providing incentives (cash or gift cards) in exchange for interviewees' time.
- DO NOT expect people to respond widely to your outreach.
- DO plan on asking people personally to participate, and/or ask colleagues, other interviewees, and clients to personally ask people *they* know to participate.



### Schedule Interviews

Conduct the interview in a location that is relatively quiet, where both the interviewer and interviewee feel safe. Use the interview guide as a roadmap. Take brief notes of things that stand out to you as important and to keep yourself on track.

- DO ask for permission to record interviews and explain how you will protect confidentiality.
- DO test your recording equipment beforehand and have back-up batteries and/or a charger.
- DO ask for the interviewees' permission to contact them later for follow up.



### Back Up Data and Transcribe

Immediately after completing the interview, take time to write down notes about the interview experience, including follow-up points and ideas about how to conduct the interview more effectively next time. Back up the recorded data as soon as possible so that it does not get lost or erased.



## Tips for Success



### Hot Topics



Push past the urge to talk *around* difficult topics (like racism or sexuality) and talk *about* them clearly and appropriately. Setting this example will help interviewees follow your lead. If this is new for you, try practicing with a trusted colleague. For example, if you are white and you are interviewing members of BIPOC communities, talking overtly about your whiteness, privilege, and power may signal to the interviewee that it is safe for them to talk overtly and not worry about your feelings so much.



### Time Constraints



A series of 1-on-1 interviews can take hours in some cases. Keep in mind how much time interviewees realistically have available and design the interview guide to stay within the time limits. Prioritize questions/themes that you *must* ask and leave room for “if time” questions toward the end. Practice the interview with someone to help you get a sense of how long it will take, but know that each interviewee will likely be different in this regard.



### Emotional Triggers



If there is a chance that your conversations with interviewees might trigger strong emotions or trauma, have a plan in place to provide appropriate resources and support for the interviewee. Always let the interviewee make ALL decisions about when, how, and whether or not to proceed with an interview.



### Tangents + Distractions



It is okay to allow some time for distractions and going off-topic, but before the interview goes too long, kindly remind the interviewee that you respect their time and that you want to make sure they get a chance to answer each of the questions.



### Number of Participants



Be realistic when deciding how many participants you are going to interview. When settling on a number, keep in mind that you have to recruit them, conduct and transcribe the interviews, and code and analyze the data. The quality of your research design, interview guide, interviews, and analysis is more important than having a large number of interviews.



### Sensitive Information + Privacy



It is important that the privacy and confidentiality of the participant is protected. Explain *how* you will protect the interviewee’s information without making promises you cannot keep. For example: 1) We keep recordings and transcripts in secure folders, 2) We conduct interviews where your privacy can be protected.

## Steps to Conducting an Interview

1. Label interview guide and notes with date, time and a unique interviewee ID to identify the interview.
2. Collect any *necessary* demographic questions like age, gender, race, ethnicity, level of education, etc.
3. Organize questions into themes that relate to the research question. This helps you keep track at a glance.
4. If helpful, insert reminders to probe when appropriate.
5. Edit your interview guide after each interview to fine-tune it.

We encourage you to share these resources with your organization, and other local social service organizations.  
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**Special thank you to Mary Robertson for writing the content of this emPower Tool!**

## What are Interview Probes?

Unlike surveys, interviews allow you to ask the interviewee to *really explain* what they mean when they say something. Your job as interviewer is to *mostly listen* and probe for detail. A good interviewer knows not to take for granted that they always know what the interviewee means when they say something. Examples:

- I heard you say, “XXXX.” Can you tell me more about what you mean by that?
- Can you give me an example?
- Why is that important to you?
- A previous interviewee said, “XXX,” when I asked this. Would you agree or not? Why?
- Use a variation of this “beginner’s mind” exercise: “Pretend I’m from outer space and have never experienced this. How would you explain it to me?”

## Sample Interview Guide

Example: Program X supports caregivers as they learn about their children’s development. Their research question asks, “How do caregivers in our program vary in their understanding of affection with their children?”

### Affection and Compassion

- What does affection between you and your children look like?
- Are you always comfortable showing affection to your children? Explain.
- Do you worry about showing affection for your children?
- What does compassion between you and your children look like?
- Tell me about a time you showed your child compassion.
- Tell me about a time your child showed you compassion.