

## Chapter 4

### Interviewing Guidelines

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains general guidelines for interviewing, procedures for handling special difficulties, special considerations for interviewing elder persons, and specific guidelines including how to probe for answers. The following guidelines were extracted from the protocol in the Women's Health and Aging Study, and the Health Aging and Body Composition Study (Health ABC) for interviewing an older or disabled participant.

Although the ultimate goal of the research interview is standardized and reliable collection of data, the interviewer also plays an important role in serving as the human conduit of information from participants to the database. The way the interviewer conducts the interviews both facilitates and standardizes the gathering of the data. The following are some of the important roles of the interviewer.

#### INTERVIEWER ROLES

**Represent the Study:** As an interviewer, you are the participant's link with the research project. While you do not act alone in the relationship with the participant, an unpleasant interview experience could tip the balance for a participant who is beginning to lose interest or is contemplating withdrawal.

- Always be polite. Remember, you represent the project and your co-workers. Call participants by name to make their experience more personal. Use titles (Ms., Mrs.) and last names unless the participant requests otherwise.
- Impart to the participants respect for the confidentiality of the information they provide by focusing your attention on them alone.
- Leave the participant with an overall feeling of well-being. The goal is to make the participant's encounters pleasant enough to be worth repeating.
- Be friendly but not chummy. Use a manner of speaking that is natural to you. If your usual style is too casual, then with your supervisor's help, develop a genuine firm and even manner.
- Approach the interview with pleasure and assume that the participant will do the same. Most people like being asked about themselves and their well-being; you are giving participants an opportunity to express themselves.
- Dress for a supporting, not a starring role in the survey scenario. Neatness and professionalism are the rule.
- When appropriate, keep contact notes on your conversations with participants for use by other research staff. Record participant information that another interviewer might reasonably be expected to know, not gossipy kinds of information.
- Review contact notes before each new contact. Be careful when using comments recorded by another interviewer. There is a difference between 'remembering' a participant and 'talking about' a participant, which may be interpreted as breach of confidentiality.

**Manage the Interview:** Control and focus the interview without dominating the participant. Your job is to get information, not to show what you know. The participant's answers to the questionnaire are important. You convey that importance by your professional demeanor, by maintaining control of the situation, and by focusing on the content of the interview.

- Be politely firm and businesslike; timidity signals lack of confidence. If you communicate insecurity or hesitation to participants, some of them will take advantage and assume a power position, others will feel sympathetic and assume a 'mother' position. In either case, the participant's responses could be biased: The participant assuming the power position could distort strong opinions to keep the position; the mothering participant could try to make the interviewer's job easier by answer obligingly.

### **Collect Data:**

- Understand the purpose and meaning of the data items on the forms. If you do not understand, ask your supervisor for clarification.
- Take no personal stake in the content of the interview. Make sure your opinions and behavior neither add to nor subtract from the research intention of any items on the form.

**Clarify the Nature of the Research Setting:** Whether you are conducting the interview in the home or in the clinic setting, the participant should continue to be informed that, the study is not part of a medical care facility. The participant should be aware that you as an interviewer are not a caregiver, helper, or advisor. The following characteristics distinguish clinical centers from medical care facilities:

- Personnel who staff the clinical centers are part of a research team.
- Research project interviewers are not caregivers, helpers, or advisors. The following is a sample explanation you can give to a participant who may have forgotten the distinction between a clinical research center and a medical care facility that has been presented to them on previous visits:

#### Sample Script:

*"Because this is a research study, some parts of this exam are similar to those at your physician's office. This can create some confusion about what to expect when we see you."*

*"We want you to know that we are not your primary care providers. While we perform some of the same procedures as your physician, we do not collect complete information on your health. Your family physician or primary care provider knows you best and can provide you with complete medical care or refer you to other physicians or specialists."*

*"We are concerned about you and your health, however, so we offer the following: We refer you to your family physician or primary care provider if we find something that we feel you should know about or should check more thoroughly."*

- Individuals who take part in the study are participants, not patients – they join and remain voluntarily. Participants contribute to the content of scientific knowledge without gaining much for themselves.

## **GENERAL INTERVIEWING GUIDELINES**

A data collection instrument is only as good as the interviewer's skills in using it, and good interviewing requires very special skills.

**Interviewer Preparation:** Studies have shown that a participant often remembers more about the interviewer and how the interview was conducted than about the topics covered during the interview. This finding emphasizes important aspects of interviewing:

- An interviewer must be an understanding person capable of accepting what the participant says without showing reactions of either approval or disapproval; the participant must feel that their ideas are important, and that there are no right or wrong answers.
- An interviewer must not influence the participant by anything they say or do.
- An interviewer must help the participant feel that the interview is an important contribution to research.

For successful interviewing, you should have broad knowledge of the research project interview task as well as of the forms and how to fill them out. Your knowledge base should include the following:

- *Understand the nature of research interviewing.* An interview is a social interaction designed to exchange information between a questioner and a participant. The quality of the information exchanged depends upon the skill of the interviewer in handling that relationship.
- *Understand the scope of research interviewing.* The research project interviewer collects data that will answer research questions and aid in policy decisions in public health.
- *Understand the objective of the research interview.* The research interview contains elements that separate it from other kinds of interviewing. Strictly speaking, the research interview is a relationship in which the interviewer has the practical, utilitarian goal of data collection. Research project interviewers must combine the utilitarian objective with the more social objective of participant retention.

The retention objective is an important one, and social interaction should be a part of every interview. But it is also important that the interview not drift into lengthy conversation. Conversation of a general nature for the purpose of participant bonding should be confined to a few minutes at the beginning and the end of participant visits or phone calls.

- *Understand the significance of research interviewing.* The research project is dependent upon the reliability and validity of the data collected by its interviewers. Bias in interviewing can compromise data. The interviewer reduces the chance of bias by presenting neutral reactions to all answers and by maintaining a brisk, regular pace of question delivery. Regardless of how carefully worded the questions and how neutrally presented, research interviews are subject to bias from two sources: interviewer delivery and participant responses. It is the interviewer's job to minimize bias from either source.

Interviewers can introduce bias into survey results by interpreting answers, favoring one answer over another, treating some questions as sensitive, reacting to liked or disliked participant characteristics, or using slanted probes or positive or negative filler words. To avoid these potential sources of bias, interviewers must perfect both neutral delivery and neutral response.

Participants can bias their responses by trying to answer questions when they simply don't know the answers. Even when participants know the answers, they don't always give them truthfully. They often don't realize that they're not being truthful. Participants may bias their responses unconsciously by slanting answers to make themselves feel better, to give responses they think their friends would give, or to provide answers they think the interviewer expects. The interviewer overcomes

participants' emotional, unconscious bias tendencies by presenting questions at a regular pace and by maintaining neutrality.

- *Know the forms thoroughly.* Follow all instructions and suggested scripts contained on the form itself and in the operations manual. Following or not following the instructions, scripts, or recommended remarks makes the difference between consistent and inconsistent data.

Study the questions and data items on the forms so that you understand what they mean. Become familiar enough with them so that you can ask the questions instead of reading them, but don't try to ask questions from memory alone. Use the form as a reference at all times. Practice parts of the interviews that seem awkward or unnatural to you until you can ask the questions in a natural manner.

Review the instructions for each form regularly. Do not rely solely on memory for detailed instructions on form use.

Use the scripted parts of the interview as they are written. Discuss with your supervisor the content and flow of recommended remarks, especially when in doubt about appropriate procedures to follow in unusual situations. It is important to communicate to your supervisor and, if appropriate, the coordinating center for the study, any specific problems and suggestions for improvement.

**Conditions of Interviewing:** Be on time as the home visit may have been scheduled around the participant's resting time. Be sure to identify yourself and show LLFS identification.

The preferred seating arrangement for most of the procedures will be around a table, especially for procedures requiring ancillary equipment such as the grip strength. If this is not possible, sit oneself across from the participant in a chair, using a clipboard or laptop for recording information. Always carry a clipboard with you for writing in case there is no table convenient on which to write.

Strive to achieve the following conditions:

- It is important to conduct the interview with as much privacy as possible. Discourage distractions from other people by letting the participant know the interview will go much faster if there are no interruptions. Some questions in the questionnaires deal with sensitive health status issues. In these instances it is especially important that we get the participant's assessment, not that of others present. Therefore, it may be necessary to stress to the participant that we are only interested in his/her views.
- It is possible that an over-protective relative or a shy participant will not permit a private interview. In these situations, you must focus on the target participant and minimize any participation from the other person.
  - It may also be possible to enlist the help of the participant in asking the other person to permit the participant to answer for themselves.
  - If the other person continues to insist on intruding, firmly state that you have been told to get the participant's answers only, but that you could talk with the other person briefly after you have finished the interview.
  - Then be pointed in directing your questions to the participant and in maintaining steady eye contact with the participant.

Both you and the participant should be seated comfortably in a quiet location. Try to be in a position that will:

- Allow you to have easy eye contact with the participant
- Enable you to be heard without raising your voice
- Avoid light glaring in either the participant's or your eyes
- Permit you to write unobtrusively

**Delivery:**

(a) Set the appropriate pace:

- Use a brisk, businesslike pace, but don't rush the participant or show impatience.
- Vary from your established pace on cues from the participant. If the participant shows frustration or lack of understanding, then slow down. If the participant shows annoyance or jumps in with answers to anticipated questions, then speed up. Do not skip questions.

(b) Maintain a neutral tone:

- Speak distinctly, without unusual inflection that could draw undue attention to part of a question. Do not place emphasis on specific response alternatives.

(c) Maintain a neutral response:

- Record information faithfully regardless of whether you think it's good, bad, boring, or exciting. Keep your reactions to yourself, no matter what you may think of an individual or the feelings expressed. Practice not feeling a reaction; school yourself out of emotional attachment to the information you hear.
- Inspire confidence by your detachment so that participants feel comfortable giving you the unvarnished truth. Do not indicate surprise, pleasure, approval, or disapproval of any answer by word or action. Do not smile, grimace, gasp, laugh, frown, agree, or disagree. Even a slight intake of breath or raised eyebrow may indicate to a participant that you are reacting to an answer. Project smooth, gracious acceptance of information, no matter how outrageous the content.

(d) Deliver the questions thoughtfully:

- Make your delivery smooth, natural, and enthusiastic. Avoid sounding like a robot. Sound fresh for everyone. You may ask the same questions a dozen times in a day, but participants hear them only once in their interview.
- Use the questions, scripts, or recommended remarks as they are written, without apology. Do not try to justify questions or defend a line of inquiry; you are asking questions that have been asked of many other participants. Tell your supervisor if you find a problem with the wording of a question.
- Emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers; the only thing that matters is the truth from the participant.

## Special Difficulties:

Administering Procedures to an Ill Participant: When conducting a visit off-site with an ill or recovering participant, it is important to be sensitive to specific situations and modify behavior accordingly. While conducting all procedures is optimal, in some cases it may not be possible.

When conducting a visit with an ill participant, use the following guidelines:

- Be sensitive to the condition of the participant and his/her level of fatigue.
- If the participant tires, offer to collect the remaining information at another time or from a proxy (if appropriate).
- If the participant is weak or chair/bed-bound, do not attempt to get weight, the measurement of the 15-foot walk, chair stands, or strength testing.

Auditory-Limitations in Hearing: A gradual hearing loss begins about age 20. As age increases, sharpness and accuracy of hearing often diminish. This type of hearing loss may make a person misunderstand words, which is often interpreted as confusion. Inability to hear well, i.e. noise from other sources (people talking, dishwasher or TV on, etc.) may make it difficult for a hearing impaired person. In the English language, consonants are more important in the identification of words than vowels, i.e. they are slightly softer in sound. Unfortunately, some consonants, e.g. s,z,t, f and g, are some of the higher frequency sounds that are lost when hearing impairment occurs.

Hearing limitations may be detected by the presence of a hearing aid or by behavioral cues, such as the appearance of inattentiveness or a strained facial expression, particularly with listening. People with hearing limitations may lean forward toward the interviewer with their "good" sides, tilt their heads, or cup their hands behind their ears. Others with hearing problems may show none of these behavioral signs but may answer questions inappropriately or frequently ask questions to be repeated.

People with hearing limitations may tire easily or show annoyance because of pain or auditory blurring when the interviewer speaks too loudly. It requires a great deal of effort for them to listen and to sort and file sounds into meaningful thoughts, especially when the conversation and the interviewer are both strange to them. People with hearing impairments may tire and give up, so be patient. Here are some tips on communicating with a person who has a hearing impairment:

- Speak slightly louder than normal and, if you can, lower the pitch of your voice. Remember that shouting will not make your message any clearer and may sometimes distort it.
- Speak a little slower than normal rate without making it stilted or unnatural.
- Avoid chewing, eating or covering your mouth with your hands when speaking to an older person who is hearing impaired.
- The best distance when speaking to an elderly person with a hearing impairment is from 3 to 6 feet.
- Facial expression, gesture, lip and body movements all give cues to the person with the hearing impairment. Therefore, good lighting on the face of the speaker is important.
- Wait until you are visible to the older person before speaking, and face the participant when you speak. If possible, arrange the environment so that the speaker's face and body can be seen easily.
- Communication with older persons who have hearing impairments is much more difficult when there are other noises.
- Never speak directly into the person's ear. This may distort your message and further hide visual cues.
- If the person with the hearing impairment does not appear to understand what is being said, rephrase the statement in short, simple sentences. Of course, you may not rephrase interview questions - simply repeat an interview question slowly while maintaining eye contact with the participant.

- Whenever possible, give the person with the hearing impairment a clue to the topic of conversation, such as "Now we're going to talk about..."
- Some consonants are louder or more visible than others. For example 'p' is easier to see on the lips than 'k'. Therefore, some words or parts of conversations may be more easily heard or understood than others.
- Do not exaggerate sounds when speaking. This distorts the message and makes the use of visual cues from your face difficult to understand.
- Individuals with hearing impairments take longer to respond; give them time.
- Do not make sudden movements that could startle the participant who gets no pre-warning from sound.

Limitations on Vision: Between the ages of 40-45, certain changes begin in the eyes. The lens and the muscle begin to stiffen. Many people who never wore glasses before need them to read. With advancing age, other changes take place in the eyes which can often:

- Make the environment seem faded; and
- Cause light refraction and a loss of some visual detail

Some results of these changes can be that more light is required to see; yet glaring light causes discomfort and, in the case of night driving, are hazardous.

Difficulties in vision may be identified by the presence of thick or dark glasses, a cloudy film over the eyes, or other discoloration of the eyes. However, some visual problems have no obvious signs. In these cases, you may be able to infer visual limitations by the manner of the participant's mobility and balance.

People with visual loss depend upon immediate sounds and tactile sensations to maintain their sense of security. They may be fearful, distrusting, and awkward in movement.

Some of the behavioral manifestations of visual loss include the following:

- A handshake may be missed because the offered hand is not seen;
- A participant may be unable to read cue cards, your identification, etc.;
- People with visual impairments may be unable to recognize other people. They may also be unable to distinguish an object from its background (objects may be knocked over or dropped); and
- Individuals with visual impairments may be unwilling or unable to move about freely because of inability to see objects in their path;
- Individuals with impaired vision may wear mismatched clothing, apply makeup inappropriately, wear clothing that is stained if they are not aware of them, or appear to be inadequate housekeepers as crumbs, spills and dirt may not be observed.

Here are some tips on communicating with people who have visual impairments:

- Before speaking, position yourself where the participant may be able to see at least your outline or a shadowy form.
- Use a calm, reassuring voice and speak clearly and softly at first. Say who you are.
- Do not touch or shake hands until you have spoken first.
- Don't make sudden movements.
- When using cue cards, etc., you may read them to the individual (except in the Cognitive Function procedure where they are asked to read the card themselves; for this exam, follow procedures exactly as directed for individuals with visual impairments).
- Don't judge the participant's cleanliness or appropriateness of choice of clothing.

Limitations in Language Function: Limitations in language function may have many causes. People with limitations in language function probably know what they want to say, but are unable to form words. Do not assume that such people lack intelligence. People with limitations in language are especially sensitive to the attitude and moods of others and may become irritated over minor incidents. They are often frustrated about their inability to communicate. There may be marked loss of self-confidence and self-worth.

Some tips on handling limitations in language functions include the following:

- Give the participant time to answer without pressure and be attentive.
- Try to give non-spoken cues and gestures so that the individual will feel comfortable responding in this fashion.
- Be careful not to put words in the participant's mouth because he/she appears to be having difficulty expressing him/herself. Instead, give time and encouragement.

Limitations in Mobility: If a person is limited in mobility or has experienced paralysis, you should be careful about the physical arrangements of the exam - seating, lighting, availability of a table - so as to minimize the need for the older person to move or to perform on her affected side.

When working with people with physical impairments, remember that:

- They may not be able to sit for long and may have to move around;
- They may tire more easily and you may have to allow them to rest or reschedule to complete the exam.

In such circumstances, be considerate of the participant's needs.

Problems in Conducting the Examination: In addition to the problems discussed earlier, you may encounter unusual situations in trying to complete the exam and interview. Some examples are discussed below.

*Participant cannot do entire exam in one sitting.* The entire examination should take no longer than two hours to complete, depending on the participant's condition and responses. Always try to complete the exam at one sitting. However, if it becomes obvious during the exam that the participant cannot complete it all because of physical limitations or mental fatigue, schedule another visit within a few days.

*Participant requests another person during the exam.* If the participant is competent to complete the exam, it is preferable that the questionnaires (e.g. cognitive function, depression, etc.) be completed alone. It may be easier for the participant to be completely honest in privacy. Explain to the participant that the interview may go faster with just him/her. However, if the participant insists that someone else be present, accept the request. When administering questionnaires, record the participant's responses and not the second person's if the two are not in agreement. It is acceptable, however, to have another person present for physical measurements.

*Participant has difficulty understanding a question.* Take responsibility for making questions understandable.

- Do not make participants feel that it is their fault if they do not understand a question.
- Take away the burden of not remembering: participants should not feel ashamed by lack of recall.
- If a participant does not remember a date, lead a discussion back through some prominent seasons or events, repeating the phrase of the question as you go.

If a participant does not understand a question, repeat the question clearly, slowly, and without raising your voice, possibly changing the emphasis of the words or the tone of your voice. Repeat it twice if the

participant has patience for it. After that, record whatever answer the participant offers and go on. Do not risk annoying the participant for the sake of an answer to a single question.

**Under no circumstances are you to reword, explain or interpret the question.** Encourage the participant to do the best they can. If they still do not understand, treat as missing data and move on.

*Participant is very talkative.* Frequently you will encounter a participant who wants to talk at much length about themselves or in a social manner, or a participant who is not able to or willing to focus on the individual questions. While being accepting of the person and their needs, do not hesitate to interrupt the participant gently but firmly, and saying something like, "I don't want to take up too much of your time, so let me ask you now: (repeat question)."

It also helps to lose eye contact with the participant, look down at the interview instrument, then look up and say, "Perhaps you can tell me more about that when we are finished. Now I'd like to ask you...", "Isn't that interesting. Now let me ask you this...", as a last resort, "Excuse me, but let's get back to the question: (repeat question)."

*Participant becomes upset.* Very occasionally a participant will become upset or cry during the interview. Talking about cancer or heart disease can arouse emotion in many people. Participants who have recently lost loved ones, especially to one of these illnesses, may become upset with some questions.

If this happens, decide where your responsibility as a person begins. There are no hard and fast rules. Remain calm but not distant or cold; let the emotion run its course. Have tissues available. Often participants who have experienced losses express strong motivation to continue with the project to contribute to the disease prevention effort.

Generally, you should be sympathetic without becoming involved. Do not routinely probe as to why the participant is upset or crying. In some cases it may be helpful to divert the participant's attention from their distress back to the interview. In fact, it may sometimes be very reassuring to the person for you to simply to say, in a matter-of-fact voice, "Now let me ask you ...(next question)." In others, this may have an adverse effect. When the participant is able, return to the interview. If the interview is completed and the participant is still upset, do not leave them until they have regained composure. If necessary socialize to help accomplish this.

It is, of course, imperative that you not try to be a psychotherapist. It is one thing to be an understanding listener who conveys human sympathy but quite another to participate actively in drawing out material relating to personal problems. The latter should not be done. Each center should establish a channel through which a referral for counseling or emergency help might be obtained if necessary. Unless it is a matter of risk to the life of a person, however, no such referral can be made without the prior permission of the interviewee.

*Participant is unable to handle the interview.* In some rare cases it will be apparent that the participant is not physically, intellectually, and/or emotionally capable of participating in the interview, although they have agreed to do so.

- Judgment to discontinue the interview is to be made by you based not upon incorrect answers to any single or group of factual or other questions, but upon a trend indicating gross cognitive incompetence, inability to comprehend the questions, inappropriate answers, or grossly contradictory answers. These would indicate the instrument will not obtain meaningful information about the participant and is probably a severe burden to the participant.

- Be alert, however, to distinguish the participant who is not oriented as to time, place etc., yet can give good information about their life, in which case the interview can be conducted.
- It may be appropriate, however, to conduct a proxy interview. If the interviewer observes changes in the participant's behavior and responses to questions that indicate that the participant does not understand questions, a proxy interview may be necessary.

*Participant has strong objections to questions.* Assume the burden of communication; take the blame for misunderstandings.

- If a participant fails to grasp the meaning of a question, admit that perhaps you did not deliver it clearly and repeat the question.
- Do not give the participant the impression that the questions were too difficult for them to answer.
- If the participant is angry, reluctant, or impatient about a single question or series of questions, respond in a non-defensive tone as though you have heard the objection before. Do not delay the interview any more than necessary; move on to the next questions. If the participant pursues the objection, remind the participant that although the researcher had a purpose in including the question in the interview, the participant does not have to answer the question.
- If the participant hesitates or refuses to answer, repeat the question. Say, "Let me go over that again. If you do not want to answer, that's your choice; but my instructions are to ask each of the questions." Add that the participant's feelings or opinions about the question are important. If the participant still refuses, accept the refusal graciously and go on to the next question.

*Participant is impatient with the length of the interview.* If a participant is anxious to finish the interview and says so, say, "I need only a few more minutes of your time. Your answers are important to us, and we would like to have all of them."

*Participant is curious about the research.* Be ready with the standard replies for people who want to know more about the research. Do not get involved in long explanations of the project, the forms, the research methods, or the outcomes of the study. Be sure to use standard responses.

- Treat as extraneous conversation remarks from participants who want you to tell them why certain questions are included in the interview. Do not invent your own explanations.
- For participants who persist, tell them that the researcher had a purpose for the question and that you must ask all the questions as they are written. Invite participants to talk to your supervisor if they wish to carry a discussion further.

**Special Considerations for Interviewing Elderly Persons:** Interviewing older persons is basically similar to interviewing persons of any age. There is considerable variation among older people just as there is among persons of other ages. Most of the older persons you will interview will be able to respond to all questions.

- A major task of the interviewer is to clarify what is expected of a participant and to guide them comfortably through the interview. Most people are pleased to be chosen as participants and to know that their answers may contribute to solving the problems of other people. Your personality and ability to put the participant at ease are usually all that are needed for a successful interview.
- Ask all questions, but most particularly those of a personal nature such as age and education in a straightforward, matter-of-fact tone of voice; accept all answers without showing surprise, approval, or disapproval.
- An interview is a two-way street: the participant must understand you and you must understand them. Speak clearly and slowly. Speaking quickly will not speed up an interview but rather, it may confuse the participant and actually slow up the interview. Always listen very carefully.

- Gauge your pace according to the needs of the participant. Some elderly participants may require a slower delivery; others may be insulted by it.

### **Specific Interviewing Guidelines:**

- Interviewer instructions are distinguished from questions to be asked of participants. They are not to be read to the participant.
- Sometimes an introductory sentence is used to ease into a question and maintain the flow of the questionnaire. Read the introduction to the participant as it is written.
- Stem or primary questions (those asked of all participants) are in the left margin. Conditional questions (those asked of some participants) are generally enclosed in boxes or drop-down menus based on responses to previous questions.
- Most of the questions have specific response options (yes, no and don't know are very common). The bubble corresponding to the participant's answer should be marked. Only one bubble is marked per question, unless the instructions state otherwise.
- The questionnaires may contain questions that do not have a series of response options, i.e., are open ended. If an answer does not seem meaningful or complete, you can encourage the participant to expand or elaborate their answer by 'probing'. Probing must be nondirective, i.e., a question or statement by the interviewer that does not suggest an answer, but does stimulate further communication. ALL of us use nondirective probes every day when we say: "What do you mean?," "Tell me about the ...," "In what way?," "Yes?," "Why?," "I would like to hear more about that...," "uh-huh...," or "I see..." .
- Never erase an answer. If the participant changes their mind while you are recording the answer to an open-ended question, just continue recording verbatim.
- If at a later part of the interview the participant mentions something that adds to or contradicts an earlier response (e.g., a hospitalization is mentioned that was not reported earlier), or the participant draws attention to a previous omission (e.g., "Oh, I forgot to tell you about being in the hospital for cataracts.") probe to correct for obvious contradictions, e.g., "I must have gotten something wrong; you just said – but I thought you said previously that..."
- Some questions combine the features of both pre-coded close-ended and open-ended questions. In addition to the pre-coded answer categories, provision is made to record an answer that does not fit into any of the pre-coded categories. "Other (specify)." The word "Specify" or "Describe," enclosed in parenthesis is an instruction to mark the code for 'Other' and to write in the verbatim handwritten response.
- It is often easier for a person to answer multiple choice question if the choices are on a card that is handed to the participant listing the response options. You will be directed by the "interviewer notes" to show response forms, some of which are optional and some of which are required.
- All answers must be obtained and recorded at the time of the interview. Nothing is to be written afterwards. Check the questionnaire to see that all questions are answered completely while you are in the presence of the participant.
- All questions are to be asked in the order in which they appear and exactly as they are printed. Ask every question unless there is a SKIP instruction. Never assume you know the answer. Record an answer for every question. Most questions generally included DON'T KNOW and REFUSED response options.
- If the participant replies in an ambiguous way, like "sometimes yes, sometimes no," to help them resolve this to a single answer, you might ask, "If you had to choose, is it usually yes or no?"
- If it appears by their response that the participant misunderstood a question, please repeat the question exactly as it is written on the questionnaire.

- Clarify the time span. Many questions ask about behavior "during the past 12 months" or "during the past year." From time to time reemphasize "past 12 months." It is usually a good idea to restate the time frame as "since this time last (May)."
- Obtain specific frequency responses. Frequency questions are generally pre-coded to translate unstructured answers into categories:
  - People do not usually think about the frequency of their behavior, and, therefore, some participants have difficulty answering.
  - Repeating the question, stressing "about how often..." sometimes helps.
  - If the participant answers in a very general way, like "whenever I have time" or "pretty often," ask about how often this is on the average.
  - If the participant still cannot answer, read the categories and allow them to choose the most appropriate one.
- Responses should apply to the participant at the time of the interview. Some questions are meant to assess the participant as they are at the moment, much like a snapshot of a person. If a participant is currently doing things differently than they usually do, decide for yourself whether the current situation is very temporary.
- If the participant's situation may or may not be temporary, code according to current functioning.

### **How to Get Adequate Answers:**

- Ask the questions exactly as worded and in the same order as they appear in the questionnaire. Minor changes in wording can completely change the meaning of a question. Unless each interviewer asks the questions exactly as shown, the answers may be meaningless. One exception to this rule is that for certain factual questions you should watch for inconsistencies and try to get the correct fact.
- Don't try to explain the question.
- Be neutral. As indicated earlier, if a participant does not seem to understand a question, repeat the question slowly and clearly.
  - Give the participant time to think about the question.
  - Unless you have other information about handling specific questions, the only acceptable answer for a participant who wants to know what a question means is "Whatever it means to you."
  - Never explain the meaning or purpose of a question unless the interviewer instructions authorize you to do so.
- Don't define terms used in questions.
- Some participants may ask you what we mean by a word used in a question. Leave the matter of definition to the participant, except where the written instructions authorize a definition or alternative wording. Instead of offering your own definition (while another interviewer is suggesting a completely different definition to someone else), simply say "Whatever you think it means" or "just whatever it means to you" or "However you use the term."
- Don't leave a question until you have an adequate answer or have determined that a participant can't give a clearer answer.
- Don't accept a "don't know" without probing at least once.
- A participant may answer a question by saying "I don't know" when what they really mean is that they never thought about it or they need time to think.
  - Give them a chance to collect their thoughts and express them.
  - With skillful help, with encouragement and time, an inarticulate participant may provide an answer to the question.
  - In general, if a participant can make a judgment in favor of a response other than "don't know," the usefulness of the data is greatly enhanced.

**Probing:** Use neutral probes that do not suggest answers. Probes are needed to obtain more complete and detailed answers. All probes must be non-directive. That is, your probe must not suggest any particular answer to the participant. Probes should be used whenever the participant is hesitant in answering the questions, such as the following situations:

- When they seem to have trouble expressing themselves
- When they seem too shy to speak at length
- Whenever there is any reason for the interviewer to think that the participant has not given a complete report of their thinking
- Reassuring probes are needed when a participant seems to lack confidence

Probing for answers to close-ended questions: In closed-ended questions, the need for probing arises when the participant gives an answer that is not included in the response categories.

Example: The question, *"Have you felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up?"* asks the participant about general depression. You read the instructions and the question, and the participant says, *"Well, everybody has those feelings sometimes."*

Repeat the response categories, *"Would you say you were down or depressed: Not at all, A little, Enough to bother you, Quite a bit, Very much so, or Extremely so?"*

Participant: *"Well, I was blue for a day or two."*

Ask the participant to choose the category that fits best and repeat the categories

Probing for answers to open-ended questions: In open-ended questions, two problems call for probing: (1) the need to clarify a response and (2) the need to get additional information in a response.

The following are examples of probes to clarify:

- "What do you mean by that?"
- "Why do you say that?"
- "In what way was it a problem?"
- "Could you rephrase that?"

The following are some examples of neutral probes to get additional information:

- "Are there other (repeat the phrase from the question)?"
- "How else would you describe (repeat the phrase from the question)?"
- "What else (repeat the phrase from the question)?"

Many interviewers forget to use two of the most effective neutral probes: silence and repeating the original question.

The value of silence in an interview is very important. The interviewer who can wait patiently and quietly with an interested expression on their face will soon find that 15 seconds of silence will elicit an answer to the question.

Repeating the question is another safe way of probing. Be sure to repeat only the question as stated in the questionnaire. This is particularly useful when the participant answers a question irrelevantly. Without pointing out that the first answer was irrelevant, simply say "Isn't that interesting. And now let me ask you this (Repeat the question)." In some cases you must remind the participant of your frame of reference when you repeat a question. For example, if you ask *"How long have you lived in the Bay Area?"* a participant

might say *"I've lived in California all my life. You know, there really aren't many native Californians my age."* Instead of coldly ignoring what the participant has said, acknowledge the answer, and repeat the question. In the above example, you might say *"Is that so! And how long have you lived in the Bay Area?"*

Other neutral probes that you will find useful are as follows:

- "How do you mean?"
- "In what way?"
- "Please give me an example." OR "For example?" OR "For instance?"
- "Please explain that a little."
- "How are you using the term \_\_\_?"
- "How come?"
- "Tell me more about that."
- "What makes you feel that way?"
- "I just want your impression."
- "I just want your opinion."
- "Anything at all – even little things?"
- "What else can you tell me about that?" (Repeat the ambiguous term on a rising inflection, which suggests a question.)
- "If you had to choose, which would you say?"

Generally speaking, we avoid some neutral probes in favor of others.

- Instead of "Anything else?" which invites a "no," you'll find "What else?" or "What else can you tell me about that?" is more likely to elicit more answers.
- Instead of "Why?" which some people interpret as critical, you'll find "What makes you feel that way?" or "I'd be interested in your reasons" accomplishes the same purposes and is less likely to be threatening.
- Some of the kinds of questions used in ordinary conversation must be avoided because they suggest answers.
  - Don't ask: "Do you mean A or B?" (unless you have asked a pre\*coded question). This is not neutral because it suggests two possible answers and there may be others that do not occur to the interviewer but would occur to the participant if they were left to their own devices.
  - Don't ask: "Do you mean (such and such)?" because many people tend to say "yes" to any suggestion either because it's easy or because they think it's the right answer.
  - Don't ask: "Then you feel (such and such)?" Even though you're trying to summarize what the participant has already said, you may be placing the emphasis on the wrong part of their answer.

Watch your tone of voice (and facial expressions in face-to-face interviewing). How you ask a question or probe can be just as important as the wording of the question. Be careful that a tone of censure or criticism does not creep into your voice. "What makes you feel that way?" is, for example, usually a good way to get people to explain their reasons, but "What makes you feel THAT way?" may suggest that only the insane would hold such a view. Similarly, your face may give you away.

Watch for vague answers. Some participants find it hard to verbalize and may have difficulty expressing their ideas. When people take refuge in vague generalities, probe for examples to help them clarify their ideas.

Guard against ambiguous answers. Certain terms may mean very different things to two or more people.

- Always ask yourself whether you are sure you know what a participant meant by an answer and whether another interviewer would have interpreted a given answer in exactly the same way.
- If anyone uses terms or phrases that could be interpreted differently by different people, you must go back to the ambiguous phrases and ask them: "How are you using the term \_\_\_\_?" "What do you have in mind when you say \_\_\_\_?"

While this is a particular problem in open-ended questions, some participants will give vague answers to pre-coded questions, which must be probed.

Avoid "depends" or "qualified" answers. Never accept a "depends" or "qualified" answer the first time it is offered as a response to any question. Participants often use phrases such as "well, that depends," "yes, but...", "I really see both sides of that question," etc. When a participant gives a qualified answer, we advise one of the following probes:

- Repeat the question (unless the response was such that it will sound as though you weren't listening).
- Preface the question with a phrase like: "well, in general," "on the whole," or "taking everything into consideration."
- Remind the participant that we want to know which statement comes closest to their views; use an introductory phrase such as "Well if you had to choose" or "Even though you're somewhere in the middle, which way do you lean?" and repeat the question.
- Occasionally a participant will answer with a genuine qualified or depends answer, which cannot be pushed into an existing code. If the participant insists upon answering in qualified terms after you have sufficiently probed, simply choose the DON'T KNOW response option.

Clarify one response before asking for more. "What else?" is an excellent probe for getting people to offer additional ideas on a subject. But before asking for others answers, use clarifying probes to encourage participants to explain what they have already said. If you don't clear up one response before asking for more, you'll wind up with a series of vague or ambiguous responses that are uncodable.

Make your probe consistent with the purpose of the question. Knowing a few neutral probes and asking them correctly is not enough. You must choose a probe that is appropriate for the particular kind of inadequate answer given.

- As we noted above, there is no point in probing "what else?" if the participant's previous answers were vague.
- Similarly, "Tell me more" may get you farther and farther away from your goal of setting the participant to choose one of several possible answers, and "If you had to choose..." would be a better candidate.
  - If the participant has answered fully but used an ambiguous term, you will want them to clarify the term by using a probe like "How are you using the term?" rather than asking them to explain, which might encourage them to explain things that are clear without clarifying the ambiguous term.
  - In the same way, a person who lacks confidence will not gain it simply because you repeat a question, whereas "I just want your opinion" or "What's your impression?" will be more likely to encourage them to answer.
- Some participants who are unsure of themselves may be more likely to respond to "Tell me any problems that occur to you – even little things."

When in doubt as to what is needed, get more rather than less than may be needed. If you get more data than we need, we can ignore it. But if you get less than needed, we must either return to the participant or code "don't know." In order to avoid the unnecessary loss of important data, bear in mind the following rules:

- When in doubt whether to ask a question, ask it.
- When in doubt whether to probe for greater depth, probe.
- When in doubt whether to record, record.
- When in doubt whether to enter an explanatory, parenthetical note, enter it.

## **TRAINING, CERTIFICATION AND QUALITY ASSURANCE**

The interviewer requires no special qualifications to perform this assessment. Previous interviewing experience will be helpful. Training should include:

- Reading and studying the LLFS Manual of Operations
- Thorough review of the questionnaires and forms.
- Practice administering the questionnaires (using the response forms) on volunteers (if possible, age-eligible volunteers).

### **Quality assurance reminders, Interviewing Techniques:**

- Read slowly, speak clearly and use appropriate inflection when speaking.
- Reduce the chance of bias by maintaining a neutral attitude toward participant's answers.
- Elicit accurate and complete information by using non-directive probes.
- Keep interview on track by presenting questions at a regular pace.
- Focus participant's attention on questions while always being polite.
- Treat participant with respect.
- Maintain a professional and friendly manner; leave participant with an overall feeling of well being.

### **Certification:**

- Observation and evaluation of two to three mock interviews (at least one mock interview should be observed by a coordinator or designee).
- Observation and evaluation of one actual interview by the coordinator or their designee.

### **Quality assurance reminders, Administration:**

- Read script and questions exactly as written on the questionnaires (same order, same wording).
- Response options read/not read when appropriate.
- Use all mandatory response forms with the appropriate questions.
- Use optional response forms appropriately.
- Follow skip patterns in questionnaires.
- Accurately record participant's responses on questionnaire.
- Follow the guidelines for recording data on forms/laptop.
- At the end of interview, review questionnaire for completeness.

**Privacy and Confidentiality:** It is critical that each interview be conducted in a quiet, private area within the clinical center or at the participant's place of residence. Each clinic should have a designated area that is comfortable for the participant and free from intrusions. Please try to seek out a similar environment in the participant's residence whenever conducting home visits.

Similarly, it is important that the participant be the only respondent during the interview unless the questionnaire specifies otherwise. The spouse/partner, friends, or relatives should not be present during the interview, because their presence may influence the participant's responses to questions. If someone is with the participant and is reluctant to leave, explain the necessity of privacy for study purposes and be prepared to suggest places where this individual can wait comfortably. You might say, "This will take about 15 minutes; the coffee shop is located down the hall", etc.

Participants must be assured of confidentiality and it is critical that confidentiality be maintained throughout the study. As noted by Westat (1987): "An interviewer must often ask questions that one would not think of asking even a close friend. Most people, however, are willing to answer such questions when they are asked in an interview. They are willing to give information because they trust that it will be used only for serious purposes." Your protection of all information about participants gained during the conduct of research is therefore essential. This means to protect not only the information you get in direct response to the questions you ask in an interview, but also the information you gather through incidental observations of the participant.

It is also important that care be taken in maintaining confidentiality of completed questionnaires while they are in your possession. Always make sure that questionnaires are not left where non-research staff can view them. You must safeguard the completed questionnaires by not leaving them unattended, such as in your car where they might be stolen, or in a school room, clinic room or office where anyone could walk in and read them. Additional instructions in regard to providing identifying information on the forms as part of the headers will be provided in the General Instructions Section.

It is your duty to keep the promise of confidentiality. Never divulge names, tell facts about or reveal the opinions of anyone you interview.

Information collected or seen during an interview can be shared only with the research team, whose members are under the same ethical or moral obligation as you are to the participants interviewed. As you may know, persons who participate in research studies have rights to privacy that are protected by federal law. Maintaining confidentiality of data is not just a philosophical issue for an interviewer. It means that an interviewer must be aware of the importance of protecting the confidences of the study participants on a day-to-day basis. For example, an interviewer's comment to a friend outside of the research team about a particular participant or about a participant's response is a breach of confidentiality and is considered unprofessional conduct.

**Administration of Instruments to Hispanic/Latino Participants:** Bilingual staff is requested to ask new volunteers what their language of preference is (English, Spanish, etc) and administer questionnaires in the language they specify. Existing participants will be prompted to continue with the questionnaires in English or Spanish if they so desire.

1. Familiarize yourself with the script so that you read it accurately and clearly.
2. Weight and length/distance measures are provided in decimal units (meters, kilograms) in the questionnaires for participants who are more familiar with the decimal system.
3. Medication Inventory: You may want to encourage participants to inform of any home remedy they may have been using or taking.

**Administration of Instruments to the Danish Cohort:** All LLFS study forms and questionnaires will be translated into Danish and administered to the cohort as their primary language.