Ethical Research Interviews for Difficult Topics

A Reflective Guide for Researchers

About

This workbook is an introductory guide to approaching difficult topics in research interviews. The nature of research means that we often need to ask for detail about participants' experiences of potentially upsetting events, and it is important to pay attention to how we conduct these conversations.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to this issue, and everyone will manage it differently, with a different style. Throughout this workbook you will be encouraged to reflect on the way you behave and react to certain situations, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and to think about what you could do differently to improve the way you manage them better.

As well as encouraging you to think about your own interview technique I will provide a structure for planning difficult interviews which will help you to consider how to care for your participants' wellbeing, and create a safe space for your participant to talk with you.

Your wellbeing as a researcher is very important when conducting interviews, and towards the end the workbook will touch on how to do this when on the receiving end of difficult information, as well as how to use reflection to assist you.

Useful Research and Resources

As researchers we all like to look at an evidence-base, so I have included below references that I have found useful when reading around this topic and creating this workbook.

For transparency, my views on this topic has been shaped by my social work training, which are from a feminist, social constructionist perspective, and influenced by ideas from systemic family therapy.

https://www.methods.manchester.ac.uk/themes/qualitative-methods/sensitive-interviewing/

Dempsey, L., Dowling, M., Larkin, P. and Murphy, K., 2016. Sensitive interviewing in qualitative research. *Research in nursing & health*, *39*(6), pp.480-490.

Dickson-Swift, V., James, E.L., Kippen, S. and Liamputtong, P., 2007. Doing sensitive research: what challenges do qualitative researchers face?. *Qualitative research*, *7*(3), pp.327-353.

Elmir, R., Schmied, V., Jackson, D. and Wilkes, L., 2011. Interviewing people about potentially sensitive topics. *Nurse researcher*, *19*(1), p.12.

Miller, W.R. and Rollnick, S., 2012. Motivational interviewing: Helping people change (applications of motivational interviewing).

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REFLECTIVE SPACE

A note on reflection....

Boxes that look like this are provided throughout the book for you to jot down your thoughts and reflections about the content we cover.

Engaging in self-reflection is an important part of improving your skills over time, but it takes practice, and can feel odd if it's not something you are used to. Do your best, and remember the more you practice reflection the easier it will be.

This workbook will cover both 'self-reflection' and a technique called 'reflection' in conversations. These are two separate processes, but just happen to have the same name!

First off, we need to talk about what 'counts' as a difficult topic. This is going to be different for everyone, and will depend on your personality and what type of situations you find comfortable or uncomfortable.

How would you feel about...

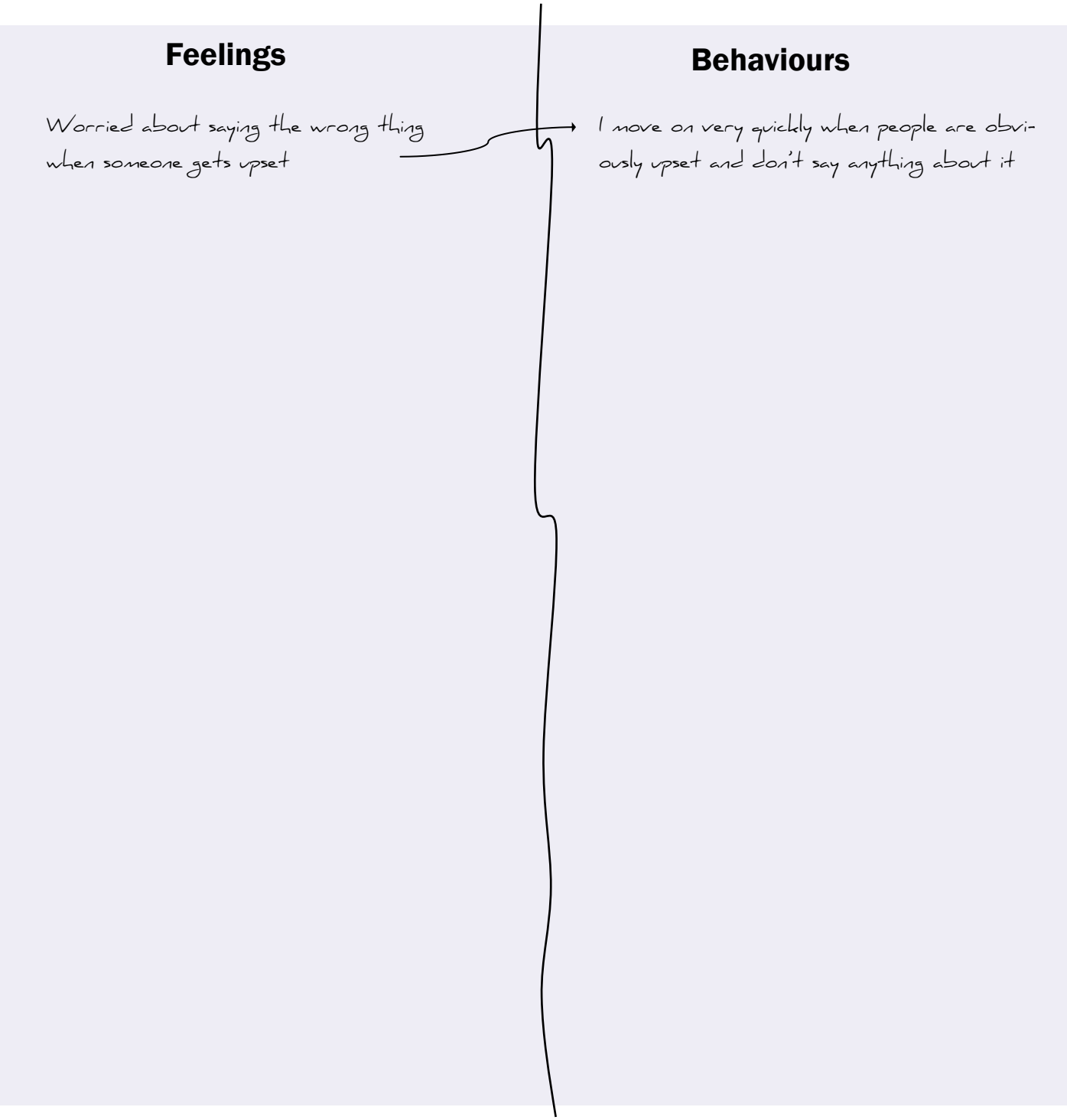
Comforting someone in distress	●	●	●	●	●
Explaining to someone they've upset you	●	●	●	●	●
Making a complaint in a restaurant	●	●	●	●	●
Telling someone you feel overwhelmed	●	●	●	●	●
Telling someone you think they are wrong	●	●	●	●	●
Saying no to a request	●	●	●	●	●

Think about the prompts above. Which feel more, or less, achievable for you? What might that say about what kinds of inter-personal situations you find hard? Note down your thoughts below, and think about how this might relate to your research topic.

REFLECTIVE SPACE

Let's move on to think about a time recently when you had a difficult conversation with someone. It does not need to be work related. What physical feelings came up for you? How did you behave as a result of those feelings?

I have included an example to get you started. If you are stuck you might find it easier to think about how you behave, and try to link that back to a feeling.



This exercise is not intended to point out things you don't do well, but to provide a spring-board from which you can start reflecting about how your feelings affect your behaviours in interviews. This self-reflection will help you to identify what you would like to work on improving.

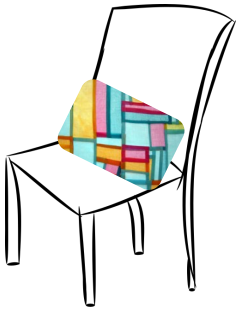
How do we begin?

The most important part of having a difficult conversation is how you start. As the interviewer you know what to expect, and may have done this many times before. Your participant has not, and so it is crucial that you cover some basic information with them at the beginning.

If you deal with potential scenarios thoroughly at the start of your conversation then it is less likely that you will encounter an unexpected scenario later on.

Not all of these steps will apply to you, and some may not be possible in your research context. Bear this in mind as your read through and think of whether you could achieve the same aim in a different way.

1 Set it up



- Think about the **location** you have for your interview, and if possible ask the participant where they would like it to take place. Some people may feel more comfortable at home, some at a University location, or over the phone.
- Is the space **private**? Is it somewhere *you* would feel comfortable disclosing personal information?
- Is the room **comfortable**? Is it warm, welcoming? This is not always possible, but can make a difference to how safe an interview feels. Can you bring things into the room?
- Offer **refreshments**, or have water on hand. These can be handy conversation-breaks if someone feels overwhelmed. (Don't be afraid to have one too, it makes things feel more friendly).
- Think about the **seating arrangements**. Being face to face can feel awkward, so having chairs at an angle to one another can be better.
- Consider the **unique needs** of your participant. If they get anxious easily maybe they would feel safer near a door so they feel in control of their exits (see Page7). If they have a gastro-intestinal condition maybe they would like to be close to a bathroom.

2 Pay attention to the basics

- Explain **who you are**.
  - What is your role and purpose for today? Be clear from the beginning.
- What is **going to happen.**
  - Practical arrangements, e.g. travel reimbursement.
  - How long will the interview take? Do you have a time-limit?
  - Is there a pre-defined structure?
- Be upfront about your **boundaries**.
  - Tell someone at the beginning what you can and cannot do for them. For instance, you cannot provide them with interventions or support but can signpost.
  - Is your interview scripted? Warn them in advance that you may not be able to enter a conversation and will stick to a script (though this style is not advised).
- What are your **ground rules?**
  - Confidentiality and data management
  - Any safeguarding procedures in place
- **Invite questions** and answer them as best you can, but be honest if you don't know.

A note on consent...

When working with deeply personal or emotionally sensitive topics it is important to pay special attention to consent.

The relationship between you and the participant will have an unequal power dynamic, in your favour. It is your responsibility to be aware of this. Some schools of thought argue that because of this it is not possible to gain fully informed consent.

As a result, be sure to put extra effort in to ensuring your participants fully understand what they are consenting to, and always ensure that methods for withdrawing consent are **clear, transparent and accessible.**

If your participant has any learning needs, or is a child please put great thought into how to be sure they understand — be creative!

3 The nitty gritty

It is important to consider that part of creating a safe space to talk about difficult topics is giving participants some control over how a sensitive issue is discussed. I'm outlining some possible 'orienting conversations' you may want to have with your participant.

Shared Language

"What word do you usually use when you talk about X?" can be a very valuable question, especially in scenarios where language is personal (e.g. LGBTQIA+, death euphemisms).

You can also make sure you share an understanding of what certain words mean, to avoid doubt later on when you analyse the information.

Exit Strategy

Together you should make a plan for if the participant becomes upset. You should be upfront in acknowledging that this is a possibility, reassure them that this is normal, and ask them what they would like to happen if they are upset. Some useful questions may be:

- How will I know if you would like to have a break?
- What kind of 'time-out' will be helpful for you if you need it?
- Is there anything that would not be helpful if you are upset?
- If you are very distressed what would you like me to do?

This is an important step as everyone is different in how they respond to their own feelings. Some people will want to power through, some will want time alone, or a cup of tea.

If someone is a minor or is vulnerable in other ways then they are less likely to tell you when they need time out. Remember to offer it to them and to be creative with how you do this. This could be with picture cards they turn over when they want to stop, or regular check-ins.

I strongly recommend the following paper on developing a 'distress protocol'. They included an initial telephone screening to identify those too high risk to participate.

Draucker, C.B., Martsolf, D.S. and Poole, C., 2009. Developing distress protocols for research on sensitive topics. *Archives of psychiatric nursing*, *23*(5), pp.343-350.

Providing Options

Remind participants of their exit options and that they **can** change their mind during the interview. For instance, revoking consent or stopping a recording.

Record some ways you might need to plan for steps 1—3.
What might be challenging, and how could you work around it?

REFLECTIVE SPACE

How to manage difficult moments

We have many tools to manage difficult moments in these interviews. The first is to follow the plan you made with your participant at the beginning of the interview, where you should have agreed how you would respond to likely scenarios.

However, when speaking about emotive topics people cannot always predict how they will react, and may surprise even themselves.

Assuming that someone is comfortable to continue with the interview, an effective method is **reflective listening.**

What is reflective listening?

Reflective listening means listening **fully** to what somebody is saying, and paying attention to all of the ways they are communicating rather than just their words. You then check-in with them about what they have said to make sure you understand.

This sounds simple—how hard can listening be?

Most of the time when we listen to others we are thinking about other things, like our own views about what they are saying, or thinking about what you want to say next so not concentrating, Maybe even checking your phone whilst listening. You might say you are 'hearing but not listening'.

Can you remember the last time you felt really listened to? What made it stand out?

Why is it a good choice for this situation?

The main features of reflective listening lend it well to a research interview. Think about what you want to achieve in your data collection:

- ☑ You do not want to influence the participants views with your own views.
- ☑ You want them to share openly and honestly.
- ☑ You want them to feel relaxed, heard and safe from judgement.
- ☑ You want to ensure you understand what they have told you.
- ☑ You do not want to over sympathise, or pity someone.

These are all things you can achieve through reflective listening, and in doing so show empathy without fear of 'stepping over a line' with your participants.

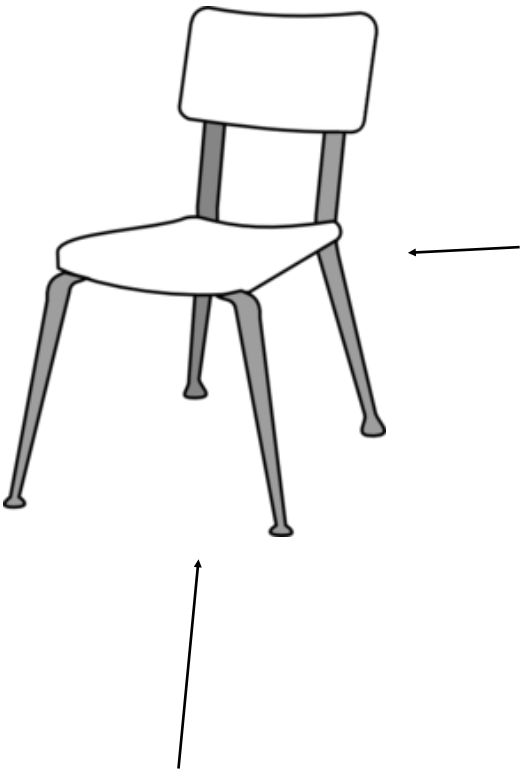
How to listen

Physical

Try not to clock-watch (have a timer if needed)

Keep your body language open

Eye contact



Speech

Let someone finish what they are saying before trying to clarify (and don't finish their sentences!)

Try to use reflections to respond, rather than giving your opinion.

Clarify things they've said to show you are trying to follow the details.

Summarise what they've told you to make sure you have understood them fully.

Don't be afraid of silence! If you feel like someone may say more, then leave the pause.

Thoughts

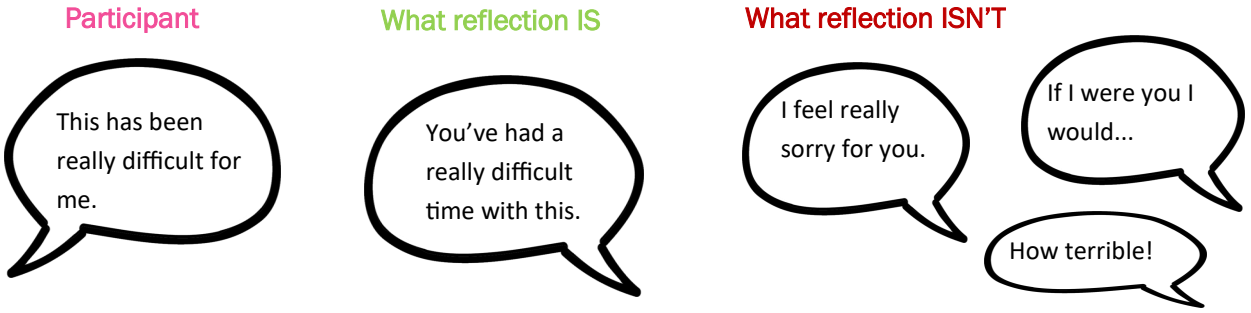
Have respect for their opinions, and lived experiences especially when they are different to yours.

Try not to get distracted by other thoughts.

Notice their body language—what does it tell you?

How to reflect

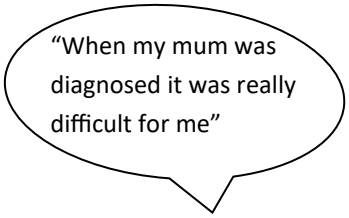
Reflecting is a key part of reflective listening, and it is just what it sounds like! You are 'reflecting' back what someone has said, a bit like a mirror. Similar to a mirror, you want to accurately portray what they have said to you, without adding your own views. However, you may offer a different interpretation of the same information.



Types of reflections

The example above is called a 'simple reflection', It is repeating back what has been said to you as a statement, often using the same words as the person who said it.

Thankfully that's not the only tool we have and all of the following are good to use too. Complex reflections may take some more practice though! The one thing they all have in common is that you really need to **listen** to get them right.



Complex Reflection	Example Responses
Repeat back what you have heard with a guess at deeper meanings or feelings behind it.	"You were under a lot of pressure to look after her as well as caring for your family and working"
Clarification	
Checking in about information to make sure you are following correctly.	"When you say difficult, do you mean emotionally or practically, or something else?"
Summary	
Used to summarise your whole understanding of a situation based on the information you have been given.	"At the time your mum fell ill you were working a lot and had young children who needed your attention, so it was a very difficult time in your life to manage all those demands on you. It was difficult emotionally to manage but you also didn't have enough time to do everything."

Roadblocks to effective listening

When we listen, we want to leave the conversation open for the participant to keep talking. Roadblocks are things that "interrupt the person's own exploration, and in order to get back to their own process, the person must 'go around' them" (Miller and Rollnick, 2012). There are 12 in total, attributed to Thomas Gordon, and easily available if you search online.

1. Giving an opinion on their decisions — "You were right to do that" or "What a stupid thing to do".
2. Persuading them with logic — "Yes, but…", "The facts are that…"
3. Judging or criticising — "You shouldn't have done that", "That's typical for an addict"
4. Providing solutions or advice — "If I were you I would…", "You should…"
5. Cross-examining — "Why did you do that?"
6. Reassuring — "Everything will be fine", "You'll laugh about this later"

These roadblocks are helpful in some instances, but when we are listening they can make people shut-down or feel like you are not interested in hearing them.

Can you identify any that you use often? Can you see why each one is unhelpful?

Self-reflection

While you will spend a lot of time during reflective listening trying to keep the focus on your participant, there will inevitably be times where your own emotions surface too.

It's important to keep tabs on how these conversations make you feel, as we will discuss later, but there may be times where you feel so strongly that it comes up during the interview.

If you feel it is appropriate you could say something like "as you were talking about your mother's illness I really felt moved by what you were saying". Sometimes this is easier that trying to avoid your emotions 'leaking out'!

A note on showing understanding….

- The reason for using reflections is that sometimes we will get them wrong. That's good! The participant will tell you if you have it wrong and correct you so you understand better.
- Avoid pity/sympathy and try to use empathy to provide effective reflections instead. You may feel pity and sympathy for participants— you should definitely reflect on this later but it may not be appropriate to show during the interview.
- Try not to over-react when someone tells you something shocking. Listen and try to understand.
- If someone asks for your opinion, or asks you to agree/disagree with them then don't lie. Try to make it into a reflection so that your views are not involved.

How to end

When you have had a difficult conversation with someone, or they have been upset during the interview, how you end is as important as how you begin. It is your role as the interviewer to draw them back into the here-and-now from the difficult things you have been discussing, and '**ground**' them in the present before they leave.

Here are some tips on how to do this—they don't take long, and they're not hard!

Let them know

Orientate people when you are nearing the end by letting them know when there are a few questions left, so they can psychologically prepare.

Don't put difficult emotive topics right at the end! Try to round-off with some simpler, matter-of-fact questions if you have had hard-hitting material to cover. Allow them to ask questions at the end if possible.

How was it for you?

At the end, if there have been lots of emotions related to the work then check-in with how they are feeling. Let them know it's not unusual to feel strong emotions after talking about their experiences, and that they may even feel them later on when they go home. This is normal.

If there are concerns around the participants safety, or the safety of others then take these seriously and make sure to ask whether the participant feels safe enough to leave at the end.

NB If you are doing high-risk work (e.g. suicide or domestic violence) please see the reference on Page 7.

Chit-chat

At the end, or on the way out, the conversation will naturally turn to chit-chat—the weather, Brexit, you name it. This is good and you should always try and end with something mundane. It helps people to re-orientate themselves and re-connect with 'real life' practical thoughts.

How are they getting home today? Ask what they are doing at the weekend, or later on. Ask what they're having for tea tonight. These day-to-day conversations are really useful for calming down and getting some space from overwhelming emotions.

Thank you

Always thank participants and reassure them that their contribution is valued by you and your team. This is especially important if they have given you personal information.

I would not advise saying things like “you gave me lots to work with”, or “you’re the most useful person I’ve talked to”. It will make people pre-occupied about what they have said.

Further support

As discussed on page 7, a distress protocol may be devised which has detailed information about further support, or even people to call for the participant (especially if a minor).

You should have details of where participants can go for follow-up support if they need it. Consider having the details printed to give to people as they leave.

Food For Thought

Several research papers have reported that participants found participating in the research had a positive psychological impact on them, and that for most the discussion of highly emotive topics is not experienced as overly distressing. On the whole people report being glad to share their views and lived experiences for a greater purpose.

REFLECTIVE SPACE

Troubleshooting

Unplanned endings

If someone withdraws their consent during the interview make sure that you still follow the steps outlined in 'How to End'. This includes giving them the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, engaging in chit-chat as they leave and being genuinely thankful for their time.

If you believe that they wanted to end the interview because they felt overwhelmed then check in with them before they leave and invite them to have a hot drink or snack to calm down if they want to.

Significant distress

If someone is so distressed that you need to end the interview (note that it may be unethical to continue in this instance even if they do not explicitly request it) then follow your distress protocol.

Use your reflective listening tools to ensure they feel heard and understood, and give them space/time to calm themselves. Ask if they feel safe in themselves when they want to leave, and follow the steps of asking mundane, practical questions about the near future to help them calm.

Secret keeping

As a researcher you may be put in a position of 'secret keeping' for participants. Depending on the topic you may obtain information about illegal activity or a deep personal secret that has never been told to someone else.

Remember to respect the privilege of hearing someone's life story, but never promise to keep secrets you can't keep!

If someone asks you to promise to keep a secret before telling you, you may remind them that you can't promise this if you feel it would be a risk to their safety or someone else's.

If this information is likely to come up you should develop a protocol for what information you can or cannot keep 'secret'.

Self-disclosure

This is a very personal choice, and depends on your preferences. Too much self-disclosure can be unprofessional ("sorry, I'm still hungover"), but some can build rapport ("I have a dog too!").

Try not to disclose anything that might impact what the participant is willing to talk to you about, and reflect on your personal boundaries with regards to this before starting.

The last few pages have had a lot of information about possible issues that may arise and ways to manage them, but this will ultimately be highly individual to your research. What issues are you going to face in your specific topic, and what might solutions look like?

Potential Issues	Potential Solutions

Looking after yourself

Previous research which interviewed researchers who conducted these types of interviews (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007) found that people often described feeling....

Desensitised **Guilty** **Attached to participants**

Privileged **Exhausted** **Vulnerable**

It's completely normal to feel the emotional weight of other people's stories when you listen to them frequently. This may be particularly difficult if the subject resonates with you in a certain way, or if you conduct several interviews with the same people and build a relationship.

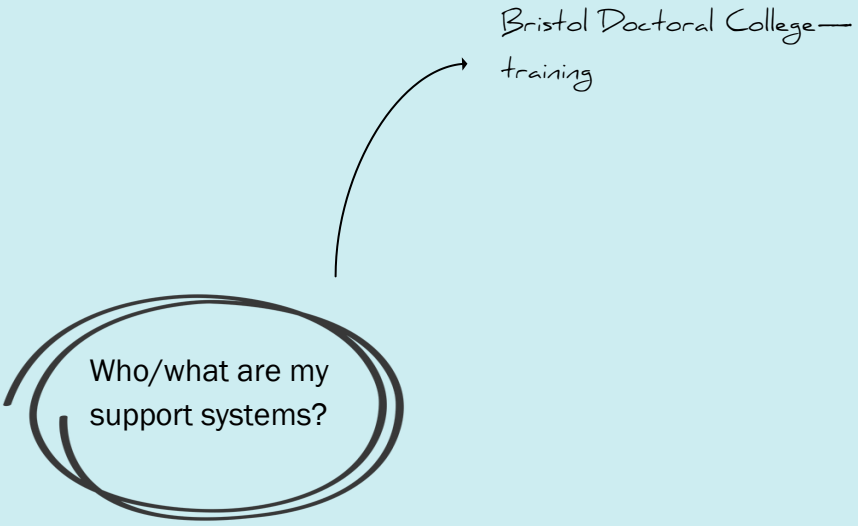
Managing these feelings requires your own, personal, distress protocol! Think about some of the following questions and use the reflective space to jot down notes.

- How are you 'winding down' after interviews?
- How do you give yourself space to think about what you've heard?
- Who can you talk to about what you've heard?
- What helps you to feel safe when you feel unsettled or vulnerable?

I would highly recommend finding a peer group of 'critical friends' who you can talk to about your research and share your ups and downs with. See Page 20 for advice on group work.

REFLECTIVE SPACE

Use this space to consider what or who your support systems are, and what kinds of support they could give you. Consider any support you are not receiving and where you could look for it.



REFLECTIVE SPACE

Keeping up with reflection

Self-reflection is the main way that you will continue to learn and improve your interview style over time, so it's important to make sure you continue reflecting as you go.

It's important to remember that self-reflection will also help you process your own feelings after particularly difficult interviews, and help you to identify why a certain person or subject matter stood out for you.

Two ways you could do this are....

Reflective Log/Journal

Keeping a log will be a good way to keep track of your progress and reflections over time, and may even be useful in writing up your results later. Some research has even published researchers reflective journals along with their results in order to be transparent about bias. It doesn't have to be fancy, it could just be notes on your phone!

There are **lots** of reflective frameworks. Two of the most popular are **Gibbs** (1988) and **Kolb** (1974). It is really easy to find examples of these online if you search them in Google.

On the following pages I use **Rolfe et al.'s (2001): What, So What, Now What?** It's easy to remember, but you can use whichever model you like best, or just free-write.

What...

- Was the issue/problem I am thinking about the most?
- Was I trying to achieve, and what did I actually do?
- Were my feelings about what happened, and what did other's feel?
- Was good or bad about it?

So What...

- Does this teach me about myself and my views/the participant and their views?
- Could I have done differently?
- Is a different way I could see this situation? Could others help me with this?
- Is knowledge that would have been useful to me in this situation?

Now What...

- Can I do differently next time?
- Is my action plan for next time?

Peer Reflective Groups

For this to work you need a group of around 2-4 people who you trust and feel you can be honest with when you are finding things difficult. Ideally they will also be carrying out difficult research.

There are huge benefits to carrying out peer supervision/peer reflection. The first is the mutual support you will get from the others, and the second is the different perspectives you will get on the problems you are facing.

A note on peer work...

Working in a group means sharing your honest reflections with others. It is crucial that everyone in the group commits to remaining **non-judgemental**, **respectful of other's opinions** and not to get carried away with "I would do this better by doing X". You are there to help your colleagues, not lecture. Respect that fact that others have made themselves vulnerable in order to discuss this with you.

What should I bring to group reflection?

These groups work well for when you have noticed something you want to do differently.

For instance, I've noticed I always want to comfort participants and it makes it hard for me to stay impartial. Or, I've noticed I get very formal when people are upset. You may even have noticed a particular bias you have.

What do I do during group reflection?

1. (3 minutes) Tell the rest of the group about the problem you are facing. Describe when it happens and what happens.
2. (5 minutes) Now don't speak. The rest of the group will discuss the problem. They should talk to each other about why you may be having this problem. Often people will say things that feel way off for you, or they may be spot on. Take notes during this bit of things that really resonated with you.

   The group can use this opportunity to pull out strengths in what you are doing too, to 'wonder out loud' or even to wonder about why you phrased things a certain way.
3. (2 minutes) Feedback to the group your notes about what they've said, and whether that's helped you think differently about the problem. The idea of this exercise is to invite new thoughts and ideas into your thinking and help you reflect differently.
4. (5 minutes) You and the group work together to devise an action plan for you. Next time you face your scenario what will you try to do differently? Make sure to bring the action plan next time so you can tell everyone how it went.

I recommend having at least one person in the group who has used a group model before.

Try reflecting on a recent experience using: What? So What? Now What?

REFLECTIVE SPACE

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REFLECTIVE SPACE

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