Approaches to Decreasing Emotional Burden During Qualitative Interviews to Improve Data Quality and Participant Engagement

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Introduction

- Qualitative interviews can be emotionally challenging at times and may elicit negative feelings such as sadness, anxiety and shame
- Mitigating participants' emotional burden during interviews is in accordance with research ethics^{1,2} and can improve data quality³ and participant engagement^{4,5}
- Although suggestions have been made to decrease emotional burden, no studies have synthesized the research to develop guidance on how to decrease emotional burden for participants during qualitative interviews

Objective

 Develop guidance for interviewers for decreasing participant emotional burden during interviews and enhancing data quality via a targeted literature review

Methods

- Embase, Medline, PsycNet, and Google Scholar were searched from 1988 to November 2024
- Keywords included: sensitive, ethical, benefit, emotional, wellbeing, vulnerable, positive, interview, qualitative research, and clinical trial
- English language articles discussing approaches to handling participants' emotions during interviews were included
- Articles about the interviewer's emotions or describing guidance before or after an interview were excluded

Results

- Of the 54 abstracts identified, 25 met inclusion criteria for full-text examination (Figure 1)
 - 9 general guidance for interviewing
 - 8 literature reviews
 - 2 clinical trial research studies
 - 5 non-clinical research studies
 - 1 case study
- Five themes emerged on decreasing emotional burden for participants in interviews (Figure 2)
- There were no articles that elicited interviewee feedback on what techniques should be used during interviews

Abstracts identified (n= 54) Abstracts screened (n= 54) Excluded (n=22) Irrelevant to topic Studies reviewed for eligibility (n= 32) Excluded (n= 7) Discussed interviewers' emotional burden (n=2) Did not discuss interviews (n=4) No guidance provided (n=1) Studies included (n= 25)

Figure 1. Flow Diagram of the Literature Review Process



Mitigating Emotional Burden



Set the stage

 Remind participants that they may skip questions or terminate the interview^{1,6}



Lean into distressing emotions

- Ask direct questions about the emotions⁷
- Allow for silence⁸
- Thank participants for talking through difficult emotions⁹



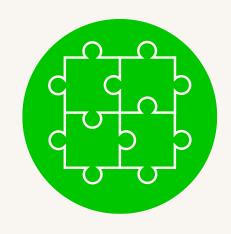
Direct away from negative emotions

- Offer breaks^{1,10}
- Ask non-distressing questions¹¹
- Reschedule the interview^{1,11}



Direct interview towards positive emotions

Encourage participant to talk about hope and optimism^{1,12,13}



Offer resources

- Connect with mental health professionals^{11,13}
- Suggest whom to contact within a clinical study¹⁴
- Offer to provide additional resources^{1,15}

Figure 2. Mitigating Emotional Burden Guidance

Conclusions

- Decreasing emotional burden during interviews requires flexibility, emotional attunement, and knowledge of professional resources
- Qualitative studies should focus on eliciting the interviewee's perspective about what techniques "work" for decreasing emotional burden using cognitive interviews or questionnaires
- Guidance is needed to address specific ethical dilemmas that may arise during interviews within a clinical trial. Examples include reporting study partner distress or handling questions that result in emotional burden for participants

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Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Viviana Hernandez and Robert Schroeder for their design assistance.

