

Improving Client Participation in GPRA Follow-up Interviews

Your behavioral health program collects Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) client data at intake, discharge, and follow-up about 6 months after the initial intake interview. This data is an invaluable source of information about your program and your clients. It can help you evaluate the effectiveness of your program and inform key decisions about services.

Obtaining follow-up data from clients after they have left your program can be challenging. It may be difficult to contact or locate clients. Furthermore, clients might express reluctance or unwillingness to participate in follow-up interviews.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) Technical Assistance (TA) Guide developed by SAMHSA's Performance Accountability and Reporting System (SPARS) is designed to help behavioral health program staff enhance their ability to successfully contact and conduct follow-up interviews with clients.

WHAT IS IN THIS GUIDE?

The three sections of this TA Guide focus on the importance of collecting follow-up data and strategies to increase the likelihood of clients participating in follow-up interviews.

- **The importance of collecting follow-up data.** This section provides a brief overview of the value of data obtained through follow-up interviews and common challenges in contacting clients to obtain this data.
- **Strategies for locating clients.** This section provides tips and resources that can be used to locate clients.
- **Strategies to increase client participation in follow-up interviews.** This section provides practical strategies to engage with clients and enhance their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews. Elicit–Provide–Elicit (E–P–E) is a framework for interviewers to use during their interactions with clients—for those inclined to participate in follow-up interviews, those who are reluctant to take part, and clients who express a desire not to participate.

Staff members typically include specialists, counselors, clinicians, or other program staff. For the purposes of this guide, we will refer to any program staff members who conduct follow-up interviews as *interviewers*.



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PART ONE: THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLECTING FOLLOW-UP DATA

Evaluation is an essential component of behavioral health programs serving people living with mental, substance use, or co-occurring disorders. Evaluation data provides important information regarding the program's services, utilization, and effectiveness. Programs collect data to comply with the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 and the Government Performance and Results Modernization Act of 2010, as well as various public or private funding sources.

Being able to contact clients after they leave a program is crucial to evaluating programs effectively. A high proportion of clients interviewed at intake, discharge, and follow-up greatly enhances the value of an evaluation to programs and funders.

Various circumstances and reasons, however, can make it difficult to locate or meet with clients after they leave your program. Some people will have moved without leaving contact information. Some may have moved forward in their recovery and do not want this reminder of their past. Others might have relapsed or experienced a recurrence of symptoms, making it difficult to follow-up with them. Still others may have become homeless, unemployed, or incarcerated. A fear of immigration authorities or police turning them in might be a deterrent for certain clients. Other barriers to meeting with interviewers may be the lack of access to transportation or childcare.

PART TWO: STRATEGIES FOR LOCATING CLIENTS

Research and experience have shown that certain strategies are helpful for keeping in touch with clients to conduct follow-up interviews,¹ including approaches such as:

- Using locator forms and tracking logs, and keeping them continually updated
- Arranging transportation for clients to and from the program for follow-up interviews
- Providing cash or non-cash incentives to participate in follow-up interviews
- Acquiring phone numbers and contact information of various people connected to clients
- Giving clients appointment cards or pocket calendars
- Using social media to stay in touch with clients
- Being flexible in terms of timing when conducting follow-up interviews
- Providing childcare and food
- Allocating time and responsibility to selected staff to conduct follow-up interviews in lieu of or in addition to providing direct services
- Doing outreach to places where clients are most likely to be, for example, community organizations, drop-in centers, shelters, streets, medical facilities, jails
- Contact your Government Project Officer (GPO) for approval to conduct follow-up interviews with certain clients over the phone

¹ *Staying in Touch: A Fieldwork Manual of Tracking Procedures* (3rd ed.); available on SPARS for download

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PART THREE: STRATEGIES TO INCREASE CLIENT PARTICIPATION IN FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR APPROACHING AND INTERACTING WITH CLIENTS

How interviewers engage and communicate with clients can have a significant influence on clients' willingness to participate in follow-up interviews. Clients will be much more receptive when interviewers:

- Greet them warmly and respectfully
- Create a sense of safety
- Introduce themselves by name and identify the program they represent (and any other necessary details)
- Ask clients' permission to conduct follow-up interviews
- Explain the purpose of the interview and respond to clients' questions
- Show genuine interest in who they are (not just extract information from them)
- Are calm and patient, not perfunctory or rushed
- Honor clients' right to make their own decisions, including whether to take part in the interview
- Affirm their efforts and strengths

A FRAMEWORK FOR CONDUCTING FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

Borrowing from the motivational interviewing approach, the Elicit–Provide–Elicit (EPE) framework can be a useful guide for interviewers to think about the flow—or back and forth—of respectful conversations when interviewers have a focus, in this case, to conduct follow-up interviews with clients².

Below you will find a brief description of each phase of the E–P–E framework followed by examples of statements that interviewers might use in each phase. The guide provides illustrations within each phase for clients who are 1) willing to participate in interviews, 2) reluctant to participate, and 3) are expressing a desire not to participate.



² Miller, W.R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (3rd Ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

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Upon greeting the client warmly, introducing oneself, and engaging briefly with the client, the interviewer will want to focus the conversation on conducting a follow-up interview. Rather than assuming the client's willingness to participate, it is wise to ask permission to conduct the interview. In addition to asking permission, it may be helpful to explain the context or reasons why you are requesting this information from them.

It can also be useful to give permission to clients to not participate, or to not feel compelled to respond to questions that they feel uncomfortable answering.

Even for clients who seem willing to participate, consider asking them if they have any questions before you begin. Some clients will likely have questions about how the agency will use the information, whether their responses are anonymous, and others.

Below we suggest ways to provide information and ask permission to conduct the interview, depending on how willing clients are to participating.

WHEN CLIENTS ENGAGE READILY AND APPEAR WILLING TO PARTICIPATE IN THE INTERVIEW

Possible ways to begin:

"You may remember being asked a few specific questions when you first began coming to [NAME OF AGENCY] and when you left. If it's okay with you, I'd like to be able to get some follow-up information..."

"I'd like your permission to do a follow-up interview with you. This information helps us improve the care and services we provide."

"Would you be willing to answer a few questions related to . . .?"

"If you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a few questions about how things have been going since the time you were discharged / stopped receiving services at [NAME OF AGENCY]..."



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WHEN CLIENTS SEEM HESITANT, RELUCTANT, OR CONCERNED ABOUT PARTICIPATING

Possible ways to begin:

“I sense that you’re not so sure about doing this interview. What would be helpful to you in making a decision?”

“Is there anything I haven’t mentioned that you’d like to know about taking part in this interview?”

“What concerns, if any, do you have about participating?”

“Do you mind telling me some of the reasons why you’re reluctant to do this?”

“Would it be helpful if I explained in more detail why this information is useful for [NAME OF AGENCY] and the people we serve?”

“It’s entirely up to you whether you choose to do this interview. Obviously, I’d like it if you would, but it’s totally your decision.”



WHEN CLIENTS EXPRESS A DESIRE NOT TO PARTICIPATE

Possible ways to begin:

“You seem pretty clear that you don’t wish to participate. May I just ask if there’s anything at all that you think might cause you to reconsider?”

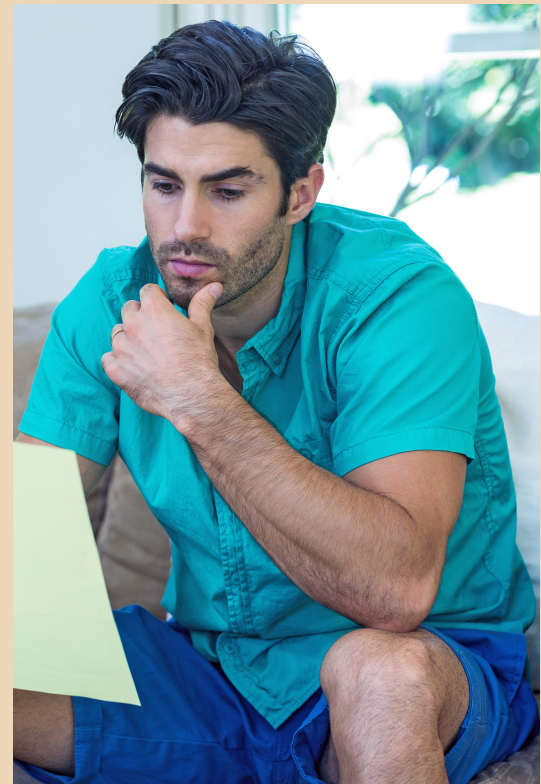
“Although you don’t wish to participate now, would you be willing to consider doing the interview at another time?”

“It’s totally up to you, of course, whether you participate. Is there something in particular that concerns you?”

“Other people I’ve met with for interviews sometimes have expressed concerns about participating due to... [FOR EXAMPLE, PRIVACY CONCERNS, NOT SEEING THE POINT OF THE INTERVIEW, BAD FEELINGS ABOUT SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED AT THE AGENCY]. I wonder if any of those things—or perhaps others—are of concern to you?”

“I respect your decision. Thank you for considering it.”

“Thank you for letting me know that you don’t wish to participate. Take good care.”



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For those clients who are willing to participate, begin conducting the interview. Your role is not only to collect data, but also to provide a safe, personable presence to make it as easy as possible for clients to “tell their story” with your questions serving as prompts. Here are a few considerations for conducting interviews.

Ensure that clients understand the interview questions, especially if there is a language barrier or cultural differences:

“Does that make sense?”

“Would you like me restate it?”

“Do you have any questions about what is being asked?”

Be aware that some clients, for various reasons, may want to please you by answering the interview questions as they think you would want them to answer. Encourage clients to tell you how things are without fear of judgment or reprisal.

“Please tell me what has been happening in your life—both the good and not so good. Whatever you share will be kept confidential and will not be used against you in any way.” [IT MAY BE NECESSARY TO INCLUDE CAVEATS HERE RELATED TO DANGER TO SELF OR OTHERS.]

When clients respond to certain interview questions, it is helpful to restate your understanding of what they said (without parroting them word-for-word). One way to think about this is to consider what you are sensing even though the client is not saying it aloud. Make a reasonable guess by asking yourself, “I wonder what thoughts and feelings are surrounding what the client is saying, yet are not being stated aloud?” Consider putting some of the guesses into words and offering them as reflective statements to the client:

“It sounds like this is still a concern for you.”

“It’s been really frustrating.”

“You’re feeling pleased about how things have been going overall.”

“You’re hoping that...”

When conducting interviews using predetermined questions, clients may get the feeling that you are interrogating them or that you are using them for your own purposes, which is partly true. It is important to be aware of these dynamics and to counterbalance these pitfalls by showing genuine interest in the person and relating to them as a human being, not a human subject.

Minimize distractions when conducting interviews. Avoid taking or making phone calls, looking at text messages, or doing anything else that could be distracting to the flow of the interview. On the other hand, try to accommodate clients if they need to interrupt the interview for any reason.

“If you need to respond to a phone call or text during our interview, please feel free to do so. My only request would be that you try to keep it brief. Does that sound reasonable?”

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Upon completion of asking all the questions on the interview form, it is important to think about how to wrap up the interview; here are a few considerations.

Often it can be helpful to ask clients about how they experienced the interview process. For example:

“How was that for you?”

“How did it feel being asked these questions?”

“What, if anything, would you like to add that I didn’t ask about or that is coming up for you now?”

“What, if anything, did I miss that you think would be important for me to know?”

If the agency offered an incentive for participating in the interview, make sure that clients have received what the agency promised.

Thank clients for participating.

“Thank you very much for taking the time to do this interview. Your responses will be very helpful to [NAME OF AGENCY].”

Throughout the interview and when bringing it to a close, consider affirming one or more strengths that you see in the person. Affirmations are positive statements that shine a light on the good qualities you see in a person, such as personal traits, knowledge, skills, and efforts. Affirmations often help people see strengths they possess that they may have a hard time seeing for themselves. Of course, you must offer affirmations in a sincere, genuine manner for them to be meaningful and resonate with clients.

“You’re very courageous in the way that you speak up for what you believe.”

“You know what’s best for you and you aren’t going to be easily swayed.”

“Your actions show you have a lot of compassion for others.”

“Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today.”