

The Participant Feedback Survey: Guidelines for Trainers

The following guidelines provide information on the Crisis Counseling Assistance and Training Program (CCP) Participant Feedback Survey and how it is administered. This information is being provided to CCP trainers and program leadership as background information prior to instructing crisis counselors on the administration of the Participant Feedback Survey. Training on the Participant Feedback Survey may be done during the Transition to Regular Services Program, Midprogram, Anniversary, or Phasedown trainings.

What is the Participant Feedback Survey? This two-page questionnaire seeks feedback and other information from service recipients. The questions about services relate directly to the goals of crisis counseling, such as reassurance and being helped to find ways to cope. The first page concludes with a section on the ways in which the respondent was exposed to the disaster. The back of the survey collects information on event reactions and demographics.

How is the survey used? The survey plays three important functions for the program. First, the survey provides information about service quality. Because it is not feasible to measure client outcomes, assessing client perceptions is the next best approach. We might find that some of the ratings are more positive than others. We'll be happy about the high scores, but we can also learn where we can improve. Second, the survey provides the program with excellent information about the experiences and reactions of people we aim to serve. This information could lead to program adjustments to meet previously unrecognized needs. Third, the survey helps planners learn about factors that influence perceptions of service quality. For example, are highly distressed individuals more or less positive about services than are less distressed individuals? Are members of different ethnic groups equally likely to report that they were treated with respect and sensitivity?

How is the survey NOT used? The survey is NOT used to evaluate the work of individual counselors. To make survey questions easier for respondents to grasp, they refer to "the counselor," but the survey does not name a particular crisis counselor. The data are examined only in large groupings defined by state, region, or participant characteristics.

Will the questions upset people? There is much evidence that people are not upset by questions about distress. Disasters upset people, not questions about disasters. Still, it is possible that answering a set of questions about distress levels may cause some people to realize that they are not coping as well as they'd like. For this reason, the survey includes a phone number to call if people are concerned about their answers to the stress questions. You should not feel uncomfortable about this at all. The worst-case scenario is that some people may become more aware of their emotional reactions, and this is not inappropriate in the context of a CCP.

To whom is the survey given? During the selected survey week, the questionnaire is to be given to ALL adults receiving in-person individual or group crisis counseling. These are generally the same people for whom you would complete an Individual/Family Crisis Counseling Services Encounter Log or a Group Encounter Log for group crisis counseling. The survey is NOT to be given to people who would be recorded on the Weekly Tally Sheet as having received a "brief supportive or educational encounter" or on the Group Encounter Log as having gotten "public education," and it is not given if the counseling occurred over the telephone. The survey is also not for people who are younger than 18.

Also, only people who are counseled during the week selected for the survey are being asked to participate. We know you have helped many, many people over the course of the project. You may see some people this week who seem less typical (or perhaps less appreciative) than some people you saw last week. Please don't be concerned about this. These variations will average out over the various counselors who are passing out the survey.

It is critical that these instructions are always followed. There will be times when you will be sure that the participants will not complete the survey. You might even think it is wasteful to give them a packet when you know they won't do it. Participating is their choice to make, not yours. Please give a packet to each person who meets the sample definition.

When should you give the person the packet? We don't want the survey to interfere with your work. Please try to behave as you would normally. Introduce the survey when your conversation is starting to wind down. Please don't give it any earlier if it would harm your encounter. And please don't wait until the person is rushing off to the next thing he or she needs to do. This requires great judgment, which we are confident you have. After all, knowing when to continue and when to stop is a key skill of crisis counselors!

What should you say when giving someone the packet? Use your own words, but you can basically say the same thing that the cover letter says: (1) that [name of project] is trying to help people cope with the stress of the disaster and recovery; (2) that to do your jobs well, it is helpful to learn more about how people are doing now and about whether crisis counselors are finding the best ways to be helpful; and (3) that this packet has a very brief survey that will take them only a few minutes to fill out but will be very helpful to the project. Appeal to their altruism! Their answers will, in fact, help the project to do a better job of helping others. Please be assured that the survey is not a burden! It really is short, and researchers have repeatedly found that people who have been through serious events understand why it is useful to ask them about it (and the services your program is providing to support them in coping with the event). You can also point out that everything they need is inside the packet: the survey, a pen, and a stamped envelope to use to mail it back in. You should mention that the survey doesn't ask for their names and is completely anonymous.

What should you do if the person needs or asks for help completing the survey? The reading level of the survey is approximately fifth to sixth grade. Some people may not be able to read at this level or for some other reason (language, or the person is blind or has low vision) will need help to complete the survey. Unfortunately, you cannot help them. If someone asks you for help, you might tell him or her that you would really like to help but you've been told not to because the people doing the survey need to be sure that counselors haven't influenced the results. Please use this as an occasion to help the participant think about other sources of potential help. Is there a family member who could read the questions to him or her? Could a friend? It might be a good idea to practice how you will handle this. Also, there could be occasions when you think people might need help even if they didn't ask for it. When you introduce the survey, you might tell them that many people prefer to have a family member or friend read them the questions so that they can think only about the answers.

What should you do if the person implies that he or she shouldn't be the one to complete the survey? Sometimes, people think they aren't the "right" people to participate. They might say, for example, "I'm doing fine; you should give this to someone who really needs help." Tell them that their participation will be extremely helpful no matter what their answers might be. Whether their opinions are good or bad, whether they feel good or bad, their survey is just as important as anyone else's. If someone says he'd like to, but he's really busy, emphasize how little time the survey will take. However, don't push too hard. People have the right to refuse, and we all need to respect that.

Should you do the encounter logs as usual? Yes, please complete the Individual/Family Crisis Counseling Services Encounter Log or Group Encounter Log as you would normally.

We are counting on you! This survey depends on the crisis counselors to succeed! Please approach it positively and be assured that it is not a burden to participants. Many people will appreciate the opportunity to give back. This is a healthy thing! We hope we've made this as little a burden as possible for you. As always, we count on your expertise and your exceptional ability to engage people.

We can't wait to share the results with you, which we are sure will help us to show how good a job we are all doing, while also giving us some guidance about how to further improve.

For additional information on the Participant Feedback Survey, please contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) or Federal Emergency Management Agency Project Officer for this grant or call the SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center at 1-800-308-3515 and ask to speak with the technical assistance specialist assigned to this grant.

Thank you for this and everything you do!