

What is Distress/Distress Protocol?

The NCVS uses the term “distress” specifically to mean a respondent’s **negative emotions related to personal experiences that are triggered by the interview questions**. While a respondent showing signs of distress is not new to the NCVS, this protocol is a new tool that can assist you when interviewing respondents. This section and later training will teach you to recognize and respond to such situations. **Your appropriate response to a respondent’s distress or discomfort is a key part of your responsibilities as an NCVS FR.**

Although this is an important responsibility, it is worth noting that you will not encounter this situation very often. Most respondents will have few or no crimes to report and are unlikely to find the survey questions distressing. People who anticipate becoming upset due to the survey topic typically do not consent to participate. Other studies on similar topics have found that crime victims approach disclosing their experience differently in a research context than they do in more emotionally intense contexts such as therapy. Even though the topic of the NCVS is sensitive, most respondents will complete the interview without experiencing distress or discomfort.

Note that some negative emotions respondents may display during the interview are not distress. Examples of negative emotional reactions that are not considered distress include annoyance, anger, or embarrassment about the explicit wording of some of the questions being asked. You will handle such reactions by applying your basic interviewing techniques and responding with the appropriate feedback as described in this lesson.

The following focuses on a distressed emotional state, which you will recognize through identifiable changes in body language and/or the respondent’s verbal expressions. The changes and/or verbal expressions may or may not be subtle. Young respondents may express distress in different ways than adults; we’ll discuss the signs typical of both adults and youth. **If you are ever in doubt about whether a respondent’s reaction is emotional distress, assume that it is and follow the distress protocol below; which is also in the Distress Protocol tab in the NCVS CAPI instrument. Keep in mind that you do not need to memorize the protocol.**

Identifying Respondent Distress

The NCVS distress protocol addresses different levels of distress. These levels vary both in emotional intensity and the response required on your part.

Respondents experiencing **low to moderate emotional distress** may show some of the signs of emotional distress listed below. Watch for them carefully as you proceed with an interview, however some of these may not be detectable during a telephone interview.

Recognizing low to moderate emotional distress in Adults (Age 18 or Older)

- Crying
- Change in mood
- Change in tone
- Voice shaking or trembling
- Frequently getting off task, allowing distractions to interrupt the pace of the interview

- Appearing “zoned out”, nonresponsive to questions

Recognizing low to moderate emotional distress in Youth (Ages 12-17)

- Complaints, such as stomachache, headache
- Irritability
- Restlessness (tapping feet, shifting around often)
- Regressive/self-soothing behavior (thumb sucking, hair sucking, rocking)
- Whining
- Acting out (aggressive, destructive behavior)
- Sudden onset of stuttering

Note that because people and their experiences do not fall into neat categories, a respondent who is an adult may exhibit some of the signs listed for youth, and vice versa.

Below is a list of signs of **elevated emotional distress**. Again, watch for these signs and verbal expressions carefully as you proceed with an interview.

Recognizing elevated emotional distress

- Uncontrollable crying
- Emotional outburst, including expressions of rage
- Not making sense
- Dissociation (can't remember the current time or place)
- Flashbacks (like they are having a bad dream)
- Statements indicating might hurt self
- Statements indicating loss of purpose or reason to live
- Statements indicating might hurt someone else
- Statements about planning or thinking about using a firearm or other weapon

Responding to Distress (The Distress Protocol)

Follow the steps in the sections below as a general protocol when respondents exhibit any of the signs shown in the lists above. The instructions differ slightly depending on whether the respondent is an adult or youth and if you are conducting a personal visit or telephone interview. As mentioned, there is no need to memorize the distress protocol. The Distress Protocol tab in the instrument reflects the steps below and will help you respond appropriately while conducting interviews.

In all cases, when a respondent is exhibiting signs of distress listed above, it is important that you remember that your role is not to act as a counselor or provide advice on improving the situation. The protocol provides guidance on offering to take a break, setting up a callback, or in some situations offering a list of resources that include individuals who are trained to work with crime victims and their relatives. These resources are listed in the NCVS-110 Factsheet which is mailed to households, but you are encouraged to provide a copy during a personal visit if the respondent does not have a copy on hand. The same list also appears on the Resources tab in the NCVS instrument.

Below are some steps you can follow when you encounter a respondent showing signs of distress:

Step 1: If the respondent is exhibiting any signs of distress, remain calm and ask the respondent one of the following:

- “How are you doing?”
- “Are you ok?”
- “Do you have any questions?”

If the respondent indicates they are “Ok” and do not have any questions, continue with the interview. Otherwise continue to step 2a when interviewing adults or step 2b when interviewing respondents ages 12-17.

Step 2a: (ADULT ONLY) If the respondent does not respond or indicates they are distressed ask:

- “Do you need to take a short break?”

If the respondent answers “No” to this question, then continue with the interview.

If the respondent answers “Yes” to this question, allow the respondent to take a short break and mention something such as:

- o “Let’s stop and take a short break. I will check back in with you in a few moments. Some respondents may need a moment to collect themselves and will be willing to proceed.”
Then continue with step 3.

Step 2b: (YOUTH ONLY) If the respondent does not respond or indicates they are distressed ask one of the following:

- “Do you need to take a short break?”
- “Would you like to get your mom/dad/another adult at home?”

If the youth answers “No” to this question, then continue with the interview.

If the youth answers “Yes,” to taking a short break, allow the respondent to take a short break and mention something such as:

- o “Let’s stop and take a short break. I will check back in with you in a few moments. Some respondents may need a moment to collect themselves and will be willing to proceed.”
Then continue with step 3.

If the youth answers “Yes,” to getting a parent/adult then find a parent/adult or ask the youth to get a parent/adult if on the telephone. Update the parent/adult that the interview upset the young respondent and they would like a short break. Then continue with step 3.

Step 3: After the break, ask the respondent:

- “Are you OK to continue with the interview?”

If the respondent answers “Yes,” continue with the interview.

If the respondent answers “No” after taking a short break, follow the steps below depending on whether you are conducting the interview in person (Step 4a) or over the telephone (Step 4b).

If the respondent does not improve after the steps 1-3 above or if they express statements that they might hurt themselves or others STOP THE INTERVIEW.

For In-Person Interviews -

Step 4a: Stay calm and say the following:

- “It seems you are upset and it may be helpful to talk to a trained counselor. I can provide you with some resources that you can contact on your own, if you’d like?”

If the respondent asks for RESOURCES, say the following:

- o “Thank you for participating and for sharing such sensitive information about your experiences. I’m going to provide you with a handout of resources. This has contact information for organizations that you can use if you want to talk about any feelings or emotions you experience.” **Give them the Resources Handout and end the interview.**

If the respondent doesn’t want the RESOURCES, say the following:

- o “Thank you for participating and for sharing such sensitive information about your experiences.” **End the interview.**

For Telephone Interviews -

Step 4b: Stay calm and say the following:

- “It seems you are upset and it may be helpful to talk to a trained counselor. I can read you the list of some resources that you can contact when we are finished or mail the list of resources to you, which would you prefer?”

If the respondent asks you to read the list of RESOURCES, say the following:

- o “Thank you for participating and for sharing such sensitive information about your experiences. Can you please get a pen and a piece of paper? I’m going to read you some different resources that you can contact if you would like to speak to someone at any point after we hang up.”
- o **Click on the Resources tab and read the names of the crisis resources and toll-free numbers aloud from the Resources tab and then end the interview.**

If the respondent asks you to mail the list of RESOURCES, say the following:

- o “Thank you for participating and for sharing such sensitive information about your experiences. I will mail a copy of the resources to you.” **End the interview.**

If the respondent doesn’t want the RESOURCES, say the following:

- o “Thank you for participating and for sharing such sensitive information about your experiences.” **End the interview.**

Note: The policies and guidance for Census Bureau employees are, aside from an emergency occurring at the time of interview at the respondent's address, a field representative may not reach out to outside parties, because that would lead to identification of the respondent, the respondent's address, and the reason for the Bureau being there, which is in violation of 13 U.S.C. confidentiality laws. Even if the respondent indicates they may harm themselves or others, we are unable to report to the authorities because of Title 13 confidentiality protections.

However, it is Bureau policy that if there is a threat posed to the safety of Bureau personnel while in the field, you may make an emergency call and then contact your supervisor.