Distress Protocol for Sensitive Research Template

When conducting research into sensitive or distressing topics there is a responsibility for researchers to carefully consider what additional risks might arise from their chosen methods.

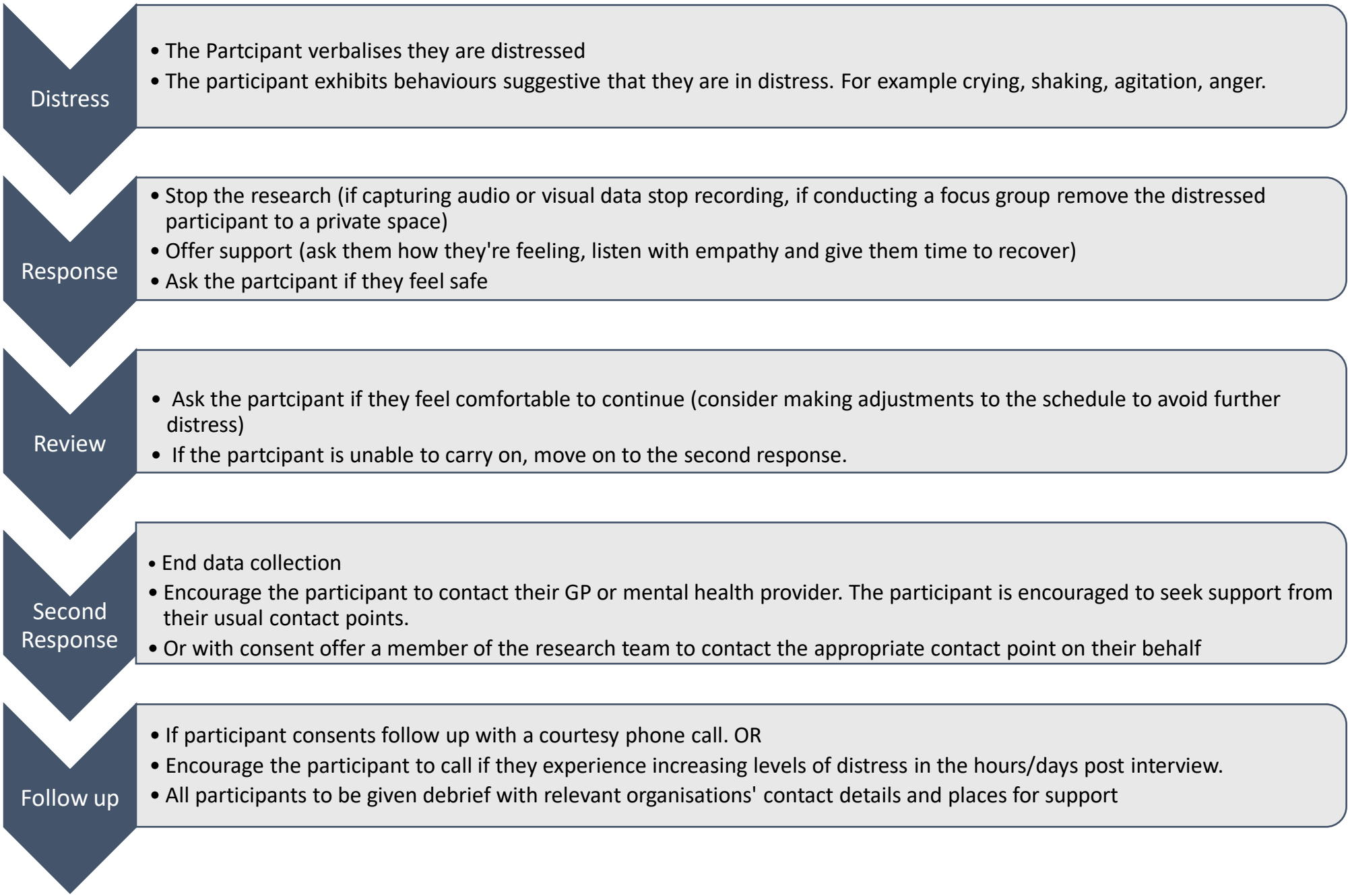
There are a number of strategies that can be put in place to manage this additional level of risk including, having a clear informed consent process which details the types of topics that will be discussed, providing debriefs and detailing relevant signposting.

In some circumstances including a distress protocol is recommended to manage a situation where a participant becomes distressed or upset. This should include a plan of action of the steps that will be taken to ensure the participant's safety during such an occurrence.

Researchers should consider what to do when distress arises, however, they should also be aware of what actions not to take.

- ✗ Try and provide advice or support yourself (beyond listening with empathy)
- ✗ Delay in arranging for them to speak to someone if they have requested to do so.

The below template, modified from Draucker CB, Martsolf DS & Poole C (2009) *Developing protocols for research on sensitive topics*. Archives of Psychiatric Nursing 23(5), 343-350, provides the steps that should be considered, these should be tailored to your research aims, methodology and population.


Distress
• The Partcipant verbalises they are distressed
• The participant exhibits behaviours suggestive that they are in distress. For example crying, shaking, agitation, anger.
Response
• Stop the research (if capturing audio or visual data stop recording, if conducting a focus group remove the distressed participant to a private space)
• Offer support (ask them how they're feeling, listen with empathy and give them time to recover)
• Ask the partcipant if they feel safe
Review
• Ask the partcipant if they feel comfortable to continue (consider making adjustments to the schedule to avoid further distress)
• If the partcipant is unable to carry on, move on to the second response.
Second Response
• End data collection
• Encourage the participant to contact their GP or mental health provider. The participant is encouraged to seek support from their usual contact points.
• Or with consent offer a member of the research team to contact the appropriate contact point on their behalf
Follow up
• If participant consents follow up with a courtesy phone call. OR
• Encourage the participant to call if they experience increasing levels of distress in the hours/days post interview.
• All participants to be given debrief with relevant organisations' contact details and places for support