EVALUATION BASICS & PLANNING WORKBOOK

forming the right metrics and strategies for understanding your participant and your effectiveness

evaluation overview

Evaluation of projects and programs is essential. While there are many forms of evaluation ranging from informal observations to double-blind randomized controlled trials, it doesn't have to be burdensome to collect and analyze useful information. Thoughtful evaluation can simultaneously be helpful to both improve operations as well as demonstrate impact to stakeholders.

Evaluation can be thought of in three basic categories:

Formative evaluation helps us to understand the context and form programs that meet evidenced needs. It answers the questions "Do we think this will work?"

Developmental evaluation helps us to answer the question, "what needs adjusting?"

Summative evaluation answers the question, "did the program work?"

This workbook focuses largely on formative and developmental evaluation as the most effective ways to create and sustain innovative programs.

part 1: formative evaluation

In the mental health context, interviews are often the most powerful way to engage in formative evaluation. Careful and systematic interviews with stakeholders and participants help to develop a clear picture of how to form your program for maximum success. Although there are many perspectives on how to best conduct interviews with evaluation in mind, here are a few simple steps to conducting helpful interviews.

related tools: mental health problem definition, mental health systems planning, mental health theory of change

interview best practices

The most powerful approach to interviews is to draft a semi-structured set of questions. Semi-structured simply means that you decide what the key questions you want to ask everyone are, but also allow yourself to have natural conversations and discover unexpected answers you didn't know to ask the question for.

Successful semi-structured interviews questions should be:

- Rooted in your preliminary understandings drawn from the problem definition, empathy, ecological systems theory, and stakeholder mapping exercises. Remember, these are iterative exercises and will be further improved through formative evaluation.
- Targeted toward filling in the gaps of your understanding. As you work on the exercises listed above, are there any disagreements in your team? This may be a sign that you need to conduct a few interviews with your participants.
- Phrased as open-ended questions (impossible to answer with a "yes" or "no").
- Phrased with curiosity, not assumptions.
- Limited to about five key questions to make space for new twists and discoveries.

interview question examples

Here are some examples of strong interview questions you may want to ask participants (keep your own context in mind):

Tell me about a time when...

What are some of the things your son has shared with you about drugs at school?

Last time you went to the doctor, how did the conversation go?

If you could change anything about your family's relationships, what would it be?

Here are some examples of weak interview questions to avoid, as they invite a yes/no answer:

Have you ever tried drugs?

Are you worried about your husband/wife?

Do you feel stressed?

Pro tip: Even if you find yourself spontaneously asking a yes/no question, you can always follow it up with "Tell me more about that."

how to set up interviews

To conduct interviews, contact participants individually and explain why you would like to interview them. Remember to frame it in a way that will feel safe for them: what are you seeking to understand and how will their participation be helpful to you? If appropriate for your context, you may want to offer a small gift to thank them for their time. The gift will depend heavily on the dynamics of your relationship with them.

If they agree to the interview, set a time to connect with them. During times of social distancing, it may be best to do the interview via phone or video conferencing. This can ensure that your conversation is as private as possible without having to be physically together indoors. If they are taking the interview at home, encourage them to find a time when they are least likely to be distracted by family members or visitors.

Remember that an interview is primarily an exercise in listening. Done well, it may even feel good for your participant to talk to you! Make sure you have shared with them any privacy or confidentiality policies that your program has, and assure them that any information they share will be kept safe.

survey best practices

If more questions come to mind and there are many gaps in your understanding that you still need to fill, you may consider utilizing a survey to conduct formative evaluation. Surveys, whether on paper or digital, are a great way to gather more data from more people. You may not have time to interview 50 individuals, but you may be able to get all of them to participate in your survey.

Surveys are best structured with simple questions that can be answered on a **5-point Likert Scale**. Usually, there is one question at the top such as "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" This question is followed by a number of statements that measure the degree of the problem you aim to address. See example below.

I related well with the people who matter to me this week.

a) strongly agree
b) agree
c) neither agree nor disagree
d) disagree
e) strongly disagree

The 5-point Likert Scale is usually easy to understand for the survey participant, and relatively easy for your team to analyze. Make sure that your survey questions can be answered with the Likert scale.

survey question examples

Here are some examples of strong survey statements using a 5-point Likert scale:

I feel capable of performing my household responsibilities.

I can learn new skills with enough practice.

I struggle to get out of bed everyday.

Here are some examples of weak survey questions:

I am productive at work and can also relax at home.

I spend too much time on my phone and I forget to help my family.

(Why they're weak: there are two components in these question, so it is difficult for the participant to decide if she agrees or disagrees. The best solution here is to split this into two questions: "I am productive at work" and "I can relax at home".)

a few more notes on formative evaluation

Remember: When conducting formative evaluation, you may miss information you don't know to ask about. It is always an option to use a combination of surveys and interviews form more robust formative evaluation.

Too many programs and models are created from faulty assumptions or incomplete knowledge. The purpose of collecting information from the outset is to increase your confidence that the effort, time, and resources required to run your new program will be worthwhile and effective. The more accurate your understanding of the problem and the participant, the more likely you will make an impact.

✏️ formative evaluation planning tool

Focus: What do you need to know, understand, or clarify in order to increase your confidence that your solution will be accessible, attractive, and effective?

Topics for interviews:
- open-ended: you want someone to describe something to you with stories and details unique to them
- process-oriented: you want someone to tell you how something happens, such as a sequence of events
- individual: you want more specific experiences or narratives to draw on and use as concrete examples

Topics for surveys:
- agree or disagree: you want to measure the extent to which something may be true by seeing how many people agree or disagree with it
- volume: you want to see if your assumptions are true according to more people than you can interview
- quantifiable measures: you want to capture numerical data about the participants and issues you're designing for

part 2: developmental evaluation

Your approach to developmental evaluation should be considered from the beginning, even if you are creating a brand new project or program. Developmental evaluation can take many forms, but the constant consideration is collecting data that helps you to monitor and enhance success.

At this early stage, you might benefit from considering how you might design your program to facilitate routine data collection and analysis. For example:

- What methods of record keeping will you utilize?
- How will you track participant engagement and satisfaction?
- How can you tell what is working and what needs improvement?
- Can you identify which key objectives and results will serve as benchmarks?
- How can you translate your mission and vision into measurable milestones?

There are many different tools and frameworks to facilitate such goal setting and measurement, but the key is to be able to set ambitious goals that you have some way of measuring your progress toward over time. Successfully setting yourself up for developmental evaluation will not result in extra burden, but instead will help you make dynamic adjustments to enhance your effectiveness and accomplish your mission.

planning your evaluation strategy

Evaluation looks different in different contexts. The following are a few steps you can take with your team to identify the most important numbers for you to collect.

Strategy #1: Look at your Project Theory of Change worksheet. Each column represents information or progress that can be quantified. Here are some examples:

Inputs: How many resources have been dedicated to your project? How much money? How many people or hours?

Activities: How frequently did you conduct activities? How many activities did you conduct?

Outputs: What did those activities lead to? How many resources were created? How many people were trained or educated?

Outcomes: Did your outputs lead to changes in behavior? How might you quantify those changes in the short-term?

Impact: What related, long-term benefits are associated with the outcomes you've identified? Are other areas of your participants' lives improved? Are concerning rates of behavior or mental health problems decreasing? Is performance at work improving? Is children's learning improving?

Strategy #2: Gather frequent feedback from participants, trainees, customers, and recipients of care. Do they like what you are offering?

If they are paying for your product or service, you can ask them directly how they would change it. Have they recommended your product or service to a friend? If not, why haven't they?

If they are not paying directly for your product or service, you can still ask them to be honest with you, but listen carefully. It is not always easy to criticize something we are receiving for free. Ask them in what ways your program has benefited them, and ask them what additional benefits they want in those areas. For example, perhaps their understanding of trauma in children has increased, but they don't know how to talk about it with other family members. You can then create a follow-on resource to answer their questions.

Strategy #3: Go back to the insights and stories you collected from the Formative Evaluation, as well as your worksheets in the "Where does it hurt" section of this toolkit. Which problems did you choose to address? What does success look like if you were to solve or alleviate these problems?

With your team, identify concrete ways of knowing whether you have been successful. Sometimes it can take time to verify this, but you can at least determine whether you're going in the right direction.

Now compare your progress to date with your vision of success. Can you use numbers and stories to show that you've made strides forward? Can you show stakeholders, funders, and the participants themselves that more time and resources should be dedicated to your program?

🖊️ developmental evaluation planning tool

Focus: How will you use evaluative processes to shape, improve, and expand your solution over time?

Tracking: our process for tracking participants and engagement across our program will be...

Key metrics: the data and feedback we are most interested in are...

These reflect our overal goals and theory of change because...

Iteration planning: we will collect data and feedback on this timeline...

We are committed to reviewing data and feedback, and creating processes for improvement on this timeline...

Progress: we will know that we are making progress if...

Reporting: we will share our progress with the following people on this timeline...