

Mental Health Safety Plans in Human Research

The University of New Mexico conducts research on many types of mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sexual trauma, substance abuse and alcohol use disorders. Therefore, it is important for the IRB to provide recommendations and establish guidelines for working with research participants who may express extreme distress and may be at risk for immediate harm to oneself or others.

Guidance

Many research projects contain assessments such as quality of life questionnaires, behavioral assessments, and/or mental health screens. As part of its responsibility to assess risks and benefits, the UNM IRB will consider if and how the PI plans to communicate results of the assessments back to research participants. In general, information learned during the course of research should be utilized to maximize any potential for direct benefit to participants. However, formal **safety plans** are only required when you may learn that participants may be at risk for *immediate harm to oneself or others*. A safety plan is a list of procedures to be followed by the project team in situations where a participant may disclose such information. This information may be anticipated based on characteristics of the study population (enrolling individuals with severe substance use disorders) or may be learned incidentally (during an interview about past trauma). In all cases, project team members that interact with participants should be familiar with New Mexico's mandatory reporting requirements. More specific information about handling crises can be found in the [Albuquerque Guidelines for Handling Crisis Situations with Research Participants](#).

Safety Plan Guidelines

The following components must be included in a safety plan and specified in the protocol submitted to the IRB. In general, safety plans should align with standard clinical practice. The IRB also expects that when necessary, those who develop safety plans seek guidance from individuals with relevant expertise.

- Assessments that ask about intent to harm oneself or others should be reviewed immediately when a participant is present or within 24 hours if the information is collected remotely.
- The individual performing/collecting and reviewing the assessments must be qualified to interpret the results or have plans to consult with qualified individuals within a specified time frame. Protocols should include these plans based on the acuity of the response.
- Plans need to include providing a referral/resource list to participants identifying appropriate mental health personnel and services for further assessment and management.
- Plans must include appropriate notification of the concern to the participant and parents/legal guardians, when applicable.
- When necessary, plans should include notification of relevant agencies (e.g. Children, Youth and Families Dept.) or use of law enforcement personnel (police, security) to detain the individual for assessment and necessary services.
- The consent form should include information so that participants recognize the potential need to breach confidentiality and obtain necessary services.