

## Tip #108 Forming Effective Open Questions

*What transforms despair and resignation  
to hope and to joy  
is to know there is a path.*  
Jan Chozen Bay

*Change and growth take place  
when a person has risked himself  
and dares to become involved  
with experimenting with his own life.*  
Herbert Otto

Our most important job as nutrition counselors is to **encourage our clients' momentum** toward positive change. Reflections (Tips #6 and 95) are the most powerful way to support this movement toward change. Questions play a vital role as well. All questions are not equal. Carefully worded open questions lead smoothly to momentum. Too many closed questions block the process.

The ratio of open to closed questions is one key way to measure the quality and effectiveness of a counseling session. A minimal level of competence is 50 percent open questions; 70 percent is what to aim for. Counselors find this one of the **hardest skills to gain**. The best way to make progress is to obtain feedback on what you are doing now and keep practicing. To assess your level of competence, count the number of open and closed questions in one session. It is impossible to do this in the middle of the session, so recording and coding all your questions is necessary (Tip #73). The first few times you do this, you will be surprised. You can then practice more open questions and record again.

Here are some questions to play with:

To **begin your contact** with a client (Tip #102):

- What made you decide to make the call today?
- Tell me what caused you to make this appointment?
- What brings you in today?
- How can I help you?

During the **assessment phase**:

- What are your health concerns?
- How do you see your food affecting your health?
- How does your day go with respect to food?
- What is your workplace like at lunch time?
- How do snacks fit in?
- Could you describe what your house is like at dinner time during the week?
- What does your child see and hear during these meals?
- How does your evening go between dinner and bedtime?

After you have provided some **information/advice** (Tip #59):

- What is your response to this handout/information/suggestion?
- How do you see using this information?

- What are your thoughts?
- How might your life be different if you were to do this?

When the client has expressed some motivation to change and **it's time to talk about action**, there are key questions to ask. It works well to offer these at the end of a summary (Tip #72) of the motivations you have heard.

- What steps are you ready for?
- What's next for you?
- What do you see as your next steps?
- Where do you want to go from here?
- Where does this put you?
- What do you see yourself doing this week?

When the client states a planned action and **you want to explore** or reinforce it:

- How might you do that?
- How do you see yourself doing this at home?
- How do you see that going on weekdays?
- What could get in your way? What else?
- Can you think of anything else going on that might have an impact?
- Is there is anything about this morning routine that you'd like to change?

**Little questions** to use throughout to encourage momentum:

- What else?
- In what ways?
- How so?
- Can you tell me more about that part?

Some open questions are **not technically questions** but function like them:

- I wonder what it would be like if you stopped bingeing?
- Tell me what was going on that you decided to call me?
- I'm wondering how you might be able to do that?
- I'm wondering how you feel about that?
- If you were to decide to look at your week and find time for exercise, what would make that happen for you, if anything?

Question **traps to avoid**:

Avoid **turning reflections into closed questions** by adding an inflection at the end. There is more on this trap in Tip #95.

Giving **advice hidden as a question** weakens the advice and stops change momentum:

- Would you be willing to walk at lunchtime?
- Have you thought of trying...?
- Could you switch to skim milk?

When you are ready to give advice, give it in the most effective manner (Tip #59).