

Tip #59 A Format for Providing Advice

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

Think about your own successful interactions with health professionals, those times when you asked for information and welcomed it. Likely several things were true: First, you wanted the information and it was just what you were ready for, no more, no less. If it was a satisfying interaction, two more characteristics were likely present: The information was provided in a neutral, factual manner, and you were given a chance to think about your reaction and to ask follow-up questions.

This is indeed a healthy, normal health-care education interaction.

- The patient asks for information.
- The health-care professional provides facts.
- The patient takes in the facts and decides what to do next.

What can you do to make it most likely clients will be active participants in the interaction?

Here's a handy format to experiment with:

- **Elicit** what the client already knows. This may save both of you precious time. Then ask what the client wants to know right now. The response might sound quite limited to you. You usually have much more information than a client is ready for. A person will hear best what he is ready to hear. Doing this first also implies respect and encourages a client to take control of his health care.
- **Provide** the information in a neutral manner. It may be tempting to use imperative language, such as "You should..." or "You have to..." (see Tip #39 for more on imperatives), or to imply the client is going to follow your instructions. "You will choose from this list of foods." Switching to neutral language makes it easier for the client to hear the information and more likely he will consider it.
- **Elicit** the client's response to and interpretation of the information. It is easy to forget this step. Keep these questions open-ended. The client will have a response. By asking for the response with open-ended language, you again imply that the client is in charge and is expected to decide how to proceed. Asking to hear the response will promote the integration process.

Here's an example:

- Initial eliciting questions: “What do you know about the effect of carbohydrate-containing foods on blood sugar?” “What information do you need from me about this right now?”
- Providing neutral information: “When people eat carbohydrate foods in these portions, their blood sugars are most apt to be in the normal range.” “This is the amount of pasta that provides 15 grams of carbohydrates.”
- Eliciting responses: “What is your response to this information?” “What do you think of this chart?” “What are your thoughts about all this?”

This is a handy format when you have little time! It pinpoints what the client wants. In the end you may feel as if you provided very little, but what you have provided will most likely be retained. The next time you are about to give advice, experiment with “elicit/provide/elicit” and see what happens.