

## Tip # 60 Open and Closed Questions

*The mind is not a vessel to be filled  
but a fire to be kindled.*

Plutarch

*Facts are useless  
if you need advice on how to use them.*

Halla

All counselors ask questions. The manner in which they are asked has a profound effect on the client. Here we look at **two types of questions**, open and closed. It is useful to be able to tell the difference and to shift easily between them.

**Closed** (or closed-ended) questions can be answered with “yes,” “no,” a number, or a very short answer. Here are some examples:

- How tall are you?
- What have your blood sugars been this week?
- What do you eat for breakfast?
- Do you exercise?
- What is your favorite snack?

These have the effect of keeping the client in a **passive role**. The longer the counselor stays with this style of questioning in a session the more passive the client becomes.

It is easy to ask closed questions. It takes more practice to use open questions.

**Open** (or open-ended) questions request a story from the client, not just an answer. They encourage thought. Here are some examples:

- What has your experience been with exercise?
- How could you see adding some high-calcium foods?
- What is your plan for this week?
- What long-term consequences of diabetes concern you most?
- What do you need from me?

These questions assume and encourage **an active role for the client** in the process of changing behavior. They will likely bring out meaning in addition to facts. They often start with “What” or “How.” It is useful to begin to ask some of these open questions as soon as possible in a session to develop rapport. They also go beyond rapport building by forwarding the work of behavior change counseling.

Here are some more **questions to practice** with. Are they open or closed? Play with the closed ones to shift them into a more open style.

- What is your favorite food?
- What is your reaction to this food plan?
- Have you thought of switching to brown rice?
- Could you leave off the butter?
- How are you doing with this so far?
- What matters most to you about losing weight?
- Do you want to control your blood sugar?
- How about water instead of soda?
- If you brought your lunch, what do you imagine that would be like?

Of course in our role as nutrition counselors we need to ask many simple, closed questions. Learning to **sprinkle in open questions** contributes to skill as a behavior change counselor.