

Asking Non-shaming Open-ended Questions

When questions are needed during a teach-back discussion, use non-shaming open-ended questions like “What questions do you have?” rather than those that can be answered with yes or no, like “Do you have any questions?” or “Do you understand?” For various reasons (e.g., embarrassment, understanding something else, real or perceived time constraints), people may answer “yes” or “no” even if they do have questions.

Open-ended questions show people that questions are welcome, expected, and encouraged. Asked with a positive tone, they help create a shame-free environment and help reveal more about a person’s understanding, confidence, ability, or challenges than yes/no questions.

Since limited literacy—or just not understanding, for whatever reason—may cause people to feel shame or embarrassment, adding openings like these can help them feel more comfortable when questions are asked:

- “A lot of people have questions about what we just talked about. What questions do you have?”
- “This is pretty complicated information and I’m sure you have questions. What questions would you like to ask me?”

You can use open-ended questions for specific areas that are most important or that are often confusing to patients or clients. While still being open-ended, adding wording to focus the question can provide structure to help them respond. For example, asking “What might be hard about getting to your next visit?” instead of “Do you think you will have any problems getting to your next visit?” is still open-ended and lets them know you are focusing on this important area. Providing this context that also conveys concern and the potential for being able to offer assistance, can be empowering for the person.

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Encourage interaction. Let people know who they can contact for answers to questions that come up later. Use the following tips.

Avoid Yes/No Questions

- “Do you understand?”
- “Do you have any questions?”
- “Does that make sense?”

Convey that Questions Are Expected and Welcome

- “Many people have questions. What would you like to know more about?”
- “That’s a lot to take in. What—if anything—would you like me to go over again?”
- “We have covered a lot of information. What questions do you have?”

Ask Open-ended Questions that Help People Respond

- “What do you think the soccer coach will ask you about when your child needs to use their inhaler?”
- “What questions do you think your grandfather will have about what his health insurance covers?”

Use Open-ended Questions that Reveal Potential Barriers

- “What are you most worried about when you get home and are taking your own blood pressure?”
- “What will be hard about managing your new diet restrictions at home?”
- “What worries you about knowing when to call the doctor or go to the emergency department or urgent care center?”
- “What worries do you have about where to find the healthy foods we discussed today that will help with your diabetes?”