

Tips for Responding to Challenging Questions

When a client catches you off guard with an embarrassing question, uses sexualized language, or says something that you find extremely offensive, you need to watch your **primary reaction**. Our goal in this situation is to appear “unshockable,” even if we have been thrown dramatically by what has been said or asked. Here are a few techniques for remaining objective:

- **Stall.** The first thing you need to do is regain your composure. You can do this by:
 - **Nodding your head slowly.** It lets the person know you’ve heard what she or he has said and are thinking about it.
 - **Having a “stock phrase” ready that you can use automatically as you gather your thoughts.** For example, “You know, I’m really glad you came to me with that,” or “That’s a really good question.”
- **Clarify** by asking a question in return. For example, “When you ask what birth control I use, are you truly interested in my method or do you want to know what’s right for you?”
- **Turn the situation back to the person.** This can be particularly effective when you’re dealing with someone who is looking for advice, or who simply seems bent on getting a rise out of you. For example, if a client were to say, “My girlfriend just told me she’s pregnant. What should I do?” You can ask, “What do you think you should do?” It’s better to help a person figure a situation out for her or himself, rather than make a decision for her or him. Asking other questions can help lead her or him to evaluate the situation and take steps toward making a decision.
- **Refer the person to someone else.** In some situations, you may feel too uncomfortable with the question or situation to be able to respond effectively. For example, if you were staunchly anti-abortion and a young woman were to ask your help in obtaining one, it would not be appropriate to try to talk her out of her decision. It would be appropriate, however, to try to refer her to someone who had this information and felt comfortable providing it.
- **If you don’t know the answer, say “I don’t know.”** Clients appreciate honesty, and they really don’t expect us to be all-knowing. The important thing is that you follow up – either suggest you look for the answer together or let the client know that you’ll get the information for her or him.
- **Explore** a concept. For example, “I know that I have to take the pill every day, but sometimes I just can’t be bothered.” Asking, “What are some of the reasons that taking a pill every day is bothersome?” can help you identify a potential barrier, and then discuss how the

barrier can be overcome. In addition, you can ask, "What do you think will happen if you don't take the pill every day?" Letting them talk about consequences will help her or him own her or his behavior without you ending up as a punishing figure.

Above all, remain calm. You don't need to know everything, and you don't need to answer every question at the moment it is asked. Being open to listening to a client's questions and concerns, and not reacting in a judgmental manner, is most important.

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