

## The Adult Learner: Dealing with Resistance

### Fact

Most of us were not trained to deal with resistance, and therefore, view it as negative behavior against us *personally*. In our training, we may not have received much guidance in working with adult clients. We were not told that resistance is normal and natural and can be used to help adults negotiate through the change process.

### Fact

We are adults and tend to resist change ourselves. We have a set of expectations and assumptions about how things should be. We come into our teaching situation expecting one thing; when our clients do not act as we wish them to, we become frustrated and discouraged. But these feelings go against our helping nature—the very core quality that brought each of us to our jobs.

We are experiencing disparity between our life values and reality. This disparity (called ambivalence) is similar to what our adult clients feel when we inform them that what they are doing is wrong when they believe it is okay.

### How to Deal with Resistance

- ♦ **Treat adult clients with the same respect you wish others to treat you.** Adults deserve and expect to be valued, listened to, and respected. It does not matter how they got into their current situation; they need to feel a commitment from you to help them achieve their goals. This means that you need to find out what those goals are. Using the open-ended questions from last month's newsletter is a good way to stage the dialogue.
- ♦ **Acknowledge what is said.** Repeat what your client is telling you and ask for further information. Yes, this might slow you down and you may not say everything you believe you need to - but think about it. If you stop and listen, you may find ways to assist your client. Will your adult client listen to you if you don't listen to her?
- ♦ **Alert your client to the disparity between what they do and what they want.** Kindly suggest to your client that on one hand, they want a healthy baby, yet on the other hand some of their habits may not be conducive to that result. In other words, if a pregnant woman wants a healthy baby and she chooses to continue to abuse alcohol, she may very well not get the outcome she expected (a healthy baby). Follow this statement up with: "Two years from now, what do you expect your child to be able to do? How does what you are doing now fit into that picture?"
- ♦ **Initial resistance does not mean permanent resistance.** Often people will resist new ideas but become receptive as time goes on. If you think your client may want to go home and think about what you said, let them know they can call or see you again regarding the issue.
- ♦ **Change focus and/or subject.** If resistance is high and you are unable to find the reasoning behind it, stop discussing that topic. You might say, "I sense that this is not a comfortable topic to discuss right now. Perhaps you will allow me to provide you with some written information that we can discuss another time. Why don't you tell me what it is that *you* would like to talk about today?"
- ♦ **Emphasize personal control.** If after you and your client discuss the situation, and your client continues to resist or even says they will not change, it is important for you to acknowledge that she has the right to make her own choices and own decision. Do not think of yourself as a failure. Do not think badly of your client. If you have walked her through the critical thinking process, provided her with your expertise, and honored her reality, then you have done all that you can. Maintaining mutual respect might easily allow you to assist her with other relevant decisions.
- ♦ **Using visual tools are often helpful to help move people out of initial resistance.** This may be particularly true for those adults who are visual learners. But all types of learners can benefit from these tools. On page 3 are a few ideas that you might find beneficial.
- ♦ **Avoid argumentation.** Don't play the role of "good expert" vs. "bad client." Avoid taking the "bait"- you should be able to direct the conversation. Once an adult believes she can trust you, she becomes more open to sharing, not arguing. If she argues, she is trying to tell you something. Listen, repeat what she says and express how you are interpreting what she says. Her resistance may be an attempt for you to help her through a difficult situation.

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### How do you know when an adult's resistance subsides?

Once an adult accepts the need to change, you might notice any of the following:

- ♦ quiet recognition (nodding in agreement is a sign)
- ♦ sadness (it is difficult to recognize that your behavior might be harmful)
- ♦ calmness (watch for muscle relaxation)

### What do you do once resistance diminishes?

- ♦ Present a menu of ideas to achieve change.
- ♦ Provide alternatives. You can say, "Others have found ways to be successful. May I share these with you?"
- ♦ Ask your client to choose ways in which they feel comfortable.
- ♦ Ask them to make a personal plan of action. They may write it down or share it with you orally.
- ♦ Offer to be available to follow-up with them when they are ready.

### Tools to Help Adults Deal with Resistance

#### Pros and Cons Matrices

Have the client tell you their response and you fill in the grid for them. After each comment, repeat exactly what the client said to make certain you understood her:

What would happen	PROS	Cons
if I don't change.....		
if I do change.....		

#### Afraid of the Unknown Activity

Ask them the following questions :

	Response
The worst thing that could happen if I don't change is ...	
The best thing that could happen if I do change is .....	

### AN EXAMPLE

You are counseling an 18-year-old primigravida. She is in her 6th month of pregnancy and has gained only 3 pounds. In the past, you would have begun your nutrition education interaction by explaining to the client why she needs to gain weight, how weight gain is distributed throughout her body, and what will happen to her baby if she doesn't gain weight. You decide that you will try some new ideas presented during the teleconference. Instead of barging right down your usual road, you choose to try to go down *the Road to Excellence* by beginning your contact in the following manner.

- ♣ You introduce yourself and ask your client if she knows why she was enrolled in WIC.
- ♣ She replies it is because she is not gaining weight.
- ♣ You then ask her what she expects her baby to look like when it is born.
- ♣ She relates something about having a healthy baby.
- ♣ You then ask her how concerned she is about her low weight gain (you choose, not to use the scale presented during the teleconference).
- ♣ She does not think it is a problem at all.
- ♣ You ask her what she knows about weight gain during pregnancy.
- ♣ She responds that she has heard that she will have an easier delivery if she does not gain too much weight.
- ♣ You ask her if she has ever heard about mothers who deliver very small babies.
- ♣ She has heard and understands the problems associated with low birth weight.
- ♣ You then share that low birth weight is sometimes associated with low weight gain in pregnancy.

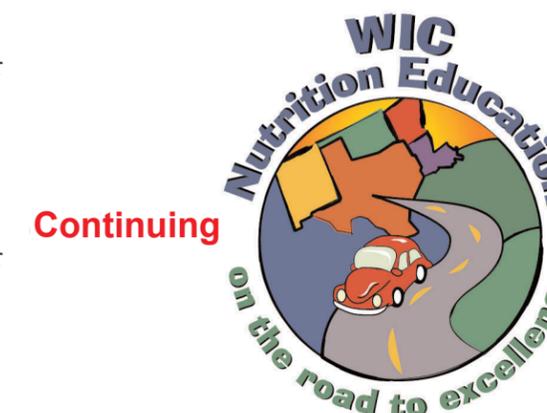
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## The Adult Learner: Dealing with Resistance

Perhaps the most frustrating experience working with adult WIC clients is their reaction to our suggestions. Here we are - THE experts with so much knowledge to give, ready to assist them, eager to share - and there they are -stone-faced, negative, and smug! How dare they act that way!

Okay - maybe this description is an exaggeration of our daily encounters, but each of us has experienced a resistant client. Since we may not be able to immediately change WIC clients to stop their resistance, we need to rethink both why clients act as they do and why we *react* as we do. Yes, this does mean **WE** have to change. Feel a tinge of resistance???



**Resistance is a normal, immediate, knee-jerk reaction most adults experience when someone tells them to make a change. Let's examine why.**

### Fact

Few adults like to be told what to do. Since adults are the experts of their lives with a host of experiences, they quickly realize potential issues with our suggestions.

### Fact

Resistance is tension between two adults with differing points of views and different levels of will. This tension results from the lack of a collaborative direction towards a mutual goal.

### Fact

Resistance to change often stems from the fear of the unknown. Being asked to change a behavior, habit or pattern is scary. All kinds of things, both good and bad, might happen. It is typical for adults to resist putting themselves in uncertain situations until they are feel more safe and secure with the change.

### Fact

Resistance occurs because adults do not like being reminded when their actions conflict with what they believe is true, with what they aspire to, and what they value most in life.

### Fact

Resistance occurs because adults don't like being corrected when they think their practices and actions are correct.

**If resistance is normal and natural- why are we so frustrated with our clients' attitudes?**

### Fact

Most of us have been trained to deliver information and expect to be taken seriously, to be listened to, to be believed, and most of all to motivate others to change. We are trained as experts in information. We have resources and the experiences of others upon which to base our counseling.

### AN EXAMPLE *continued...*

- ♣ She expresses a higher level of personal concern but still doesn't want to gain weight. She shares that she has always had a weight problem. Just before getting pregnant she lost lots of weight and felt great about herself.
- ♣ You sit and listen, nodding your head in recognition of her situation. You remain silent and through your body language you encourage her to continue talking.
- ♣ She then shares that her boyfriend likes her thin and he doesn't want her to get fat like all the other pregnant women.
- ♣ **Hurray - you may have gotten to the bottom of the issue.** You ask how she feels about how her low weight gain may impact her expectation of having a healthy baby. You ask if she would like you to provide her with written information to share with her boyfriend or if she would like to bring her boyfriend into the clinic during her next visit. You encourage her to think about her situation until her next WIC visit when she can talk with you again. You ask her to take some time and consider what she might do to meet her baby's needs, her own needs, and those of her boyfriend.
- ♣ If she expresses interest prior to leaving, you can ask her what she would like from you right now. Perhaps she might like to hear how others have handled the situation or perhaps you could give her some handouts that describe weight gain or she may even want to review her food choices and eating patterns with you to see what she could change.

In this example, the responsibility of making the change is given to the adult client with the educator directing the conversation and negotiating through the initial resistance. Of course, resistance isn't always this simple to resolve. But allowing client the opportunity to share their realities will make it easier for you to select when, where and how to share your expertise so it will be more meaningful and useful to your adult clients leaves.