



# Help people solve or prevent problems! Don't "teach nutrition!"

As you know, people aren't often interested in knowing how iron is involved in picking oxygen up in the lungs.

Nor do they want to know what vitamin does this and what one does that. They have a hard time remembering what foods are high in Vitamin A. They not only don't remember--they also don't really care!

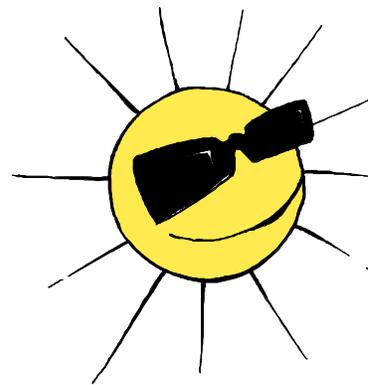
Why not? Because it seems unrelated to their real concerns. As you know, they are busy coping with life in the present.

They are dealing with the fact that their baby is spitting up the formula, or is a picky eater, or lives on peanut butter. They are

trying to wean their baby or deal with teething, or get their child to drink milk. They wish they could lose weight, they wonder if their kids get enough vegetables, and they wonder what

they can do if they run out of formula before the end of the month.

But they **aren't** worried about food sources of nutrients or what folic acid does in the body! That's too much like school. They aren't worried about something



*How can we orient ourselves more to helping people solve or prevent problems or deal with the things that concern them RIGHT NOW?*

that could happen to them in the distant future. That's too abstract because they can't feel it, see it, or do it.

There are also cultural differences. We may not think of ourselves as "future-oriented" but our dominant American culture is a lot more "future-oriented" than a lot of cultures. We often think in terms of delaying gratification so that our future is better. We think in terms of making lifestyle changes now, like restricting fat, so that our later years are healthier.

Other cultures look at the future differently. In some cultures, the future may be considered essentially beyond human control. The focus is on the present. It's all people have. "Let the good times roll!"

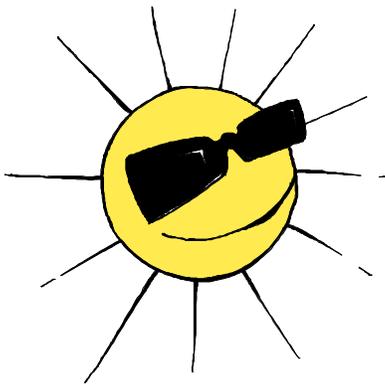
**We can therefore be a lot more effective if we deal with the present and the personal!** If we want people to be interested in what we have to say, we must relate nutrition to their biggest concerns: **their** kids, **their** weight gain during pregnancy, **their** budget, **their** child's growth. Adults learn best if they see

how they can apply what they are learning to some problem they want to solve or something they are thinking about or are worried about--now.

### **What else do we know about adults as learners?**

- **Adults are a lot different than children in school.** In school, the teacher has all the authority, while the student is at the bottom of the totem pole, being told what to do. Adults don't like that role. Adults also may not have had much success in school and they don't like to feel they are back in that situation again. (that is one good reason to make your "WIC group classes" as little like school as possible! In fact, why not call them something besides "classes?")

- **Adults already know a lot.** Sometimes people are skeptical that we can teach them anything new or help them with the things that worry them. ("I've raised 5 children of my own . . .") It's important for us to recognize that people know a lot! Our approach should be



to find out "where they're at" and build on what they already know.

- **Adults have needs for self-esteem.** All of us do and it affects how much we're willing to put our-selves out there, how much we're willing to expose our-selves. Parents with self-confidence and healthy self-esteem raise healthy chil-dren. How can we commu-nicate respect and help people feel good about themselves as parents while they learn more about how to take care of their children nutritionally?



- **Adult learners may have doubts about our capacity to relate to their situations.** They may suspect that we're not sensitive to their culture or their finances. To be really effective, we may have to clearly convey our sensitivity to how different their culture might be from our own. We can also make the point that the problems they are having are universal ones: all kids go through this, most pregnant women go through this, most breast-feeding moms deal with this.

- **Most adults are going to decide right then and there if we make sense.** We basically get one shot to make

sense to people. Like us, they've got a lot to deal with in life. If we're not helpful, we can't really expect them to pay much attention. We certainly can't expect them to go home and get some-thing more out of that hand-out we've given them.

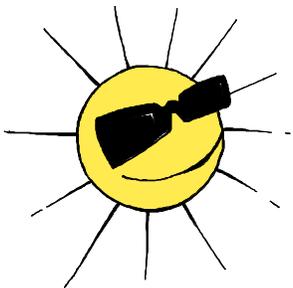
- **It's the adult's choice whether to learn anything or not!** When somebody signs up for our program, they don't say they'll **learn**; they just say they'll **come!** We can't force anything on an adult learner and hope that it sticks!

- **Adults are the most ready to learn when they have a new situation to deal with (like a new baby coming), a problem they are trying to solve, or something they've been worried about.**

- **Adults often don't like the role they may feel they play in WIC clinic, but they want the services and the food, so they put up with it.** They don't espec-ially like to be the one in need of help, with us as the designated helpers. They prefer more equality. Each of our efforts to make the situation more equal will be

noticed. More change can take place when participants have reached a psychological "comfort level."

• **Adults are not always good problem solvers and people in different cultures solve problems differently.** We educators tend to be very practical. We break problems down into pieces: what exactly is the problem, what causes the problem, how can we change what causes the problem, what alternatives are there, which alternatives make the best sense, what's the time frame, what results can we expect? We approach problems in a pretty organized way.



Many people don't operate that way and can use your help as they think through how to solve problems. You, in turn, can learn how people solve problems in other ways and can adapt that information and approach in your work.

"Persons learn only what they believe will be useful to them, and they retain only what they think they need or shall need. The more immediately persons can put new learning to use, the more readily they grasp it. The more it satisfies their immediate goals, the more effective the learning will be."

Sue Rodwell Williams  
Nutrition and Diet Therapy, 6th Ed.

**In conclusion, if we apply what we know about "adult learners" to our everyday situations in clinic, how does it affect our nutrition education and counseling?**

- Are we trying to "teach nutrition" without making it relate directly to people's immediate concerns?
- How can we orient our-selves more to helping people solve or prevent problems or deal with the things that concern them right now?
- How can we tell people that we respect what they already know?
- How can we communicate more clearly that we do, in-deed, relate to a participant's situation? Could we come right out and say it more often?
- How can we communicate more clearly that we feel like equal partners with the participant, with both of us bringing our resources to the same problem?
- Can we really accept that our agenda is not the most important one, but that the participant's is? Once we accept that, how can we actually communicate it?

# ACTIVITIES to do before Discussion

## Help people solve or prevent problems. Don't "teach nutrition."

The focus of these activities is to help you become aware of how much you currently tap into the participant's solutions and ideas. Can you take more advantage of her knowledge of what she can do to solve the problem or change a situation? Can you help her verbalize things she already knows and help her put those things together into an action plan?

**1. *We've talked about adult learners, but how about us, the people who work with adult learners?***

What can be generalized about us? Which of us are the most successful? One answer may lie in what one researcher found as he investigated how adults learn best:

- When adults want to learn, they often seek the help of others.
- The ideal helper is warm, loving, accepting, supportive, encouraging, and friendly.
- The helper cares about the learner and cares about the problem, taking it seriously.
- The helper considers the learner an equal and views the interactions with the learner as a dialogue.

Tough, A: The Adult's Learning Projects, Toronto, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1971.



Is this a good definition of a helper? Think about it.

- 2. *People's problem solving and thinking skills are not always well-developed.*** It also takes a certain amount of confidence and maturity to be able to see problems as solvable. People get overwhelmed. Encouraging people to break big problems down into manageable parts can be very helpful. Find three good examples of a time you helped a specific participant break a problem down into a series of things she could do. Put those examples on the Activity Worksheet.
- 3. *Does your documentation reflect your problem-solving orientation?*** Think about it.
- 4. *We have a strong cultural bias for our way of thinking and other people have strong cultural biases for other ways of thinking.*** What comes up in your clinic that shows you how other people think differently than you do about some things? Do you notice any differences between you and your clients about being on time for appointments, or different styles of problem solving? Do you notice a fatalistic approach to the future? Write examples of 5 ways people in clinic think differently than you do about things. Discuss these examples with your supervisor or in a staff discussion group.

5. **Copy this page and then cut out this list of resolutions.** Put it on your schedule book or over your desk where you'll see it. Remind yourself to do these things. Reward yourself in a little way each time you are successful!

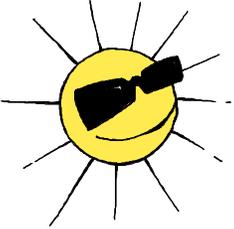
- **I will help people solve or prevent problems.**
- **I will convey to people that I respect what they already know.**
- **I will tell people if and how I can relate to their situation.**
- **I will let people know in little ways that we re equal partners.**
- **I will communicate that it's their agenda that's important.**

Thinking about and doing these Activities will prepare you for the discussion. Complete the Activity Worksheet as you practice these activities.

**Activity Worksheet**  
**Bright Ideas - Unit 4**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



**Help people solve or prevent problems.  
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**What do you think makes you successful when you work with adult learners such as WIC clients?**

**Write down three examples of how you have encouraged WIC clients to break big problems down into manageable parts or a series of things they could do:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**Write examples of three ways clients may think differently than you do:**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**Explain how you have let people know in little ways that you can relate to their situation:**

Discuss these ideas with your supervisor or in a staff discussion group. These activity pages and a discussion are to be done for completion of the module.