

# teaching tips

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## Appreciative Inquiry

### ABSTRACT

Appreciative inquiry, which emphasizes using affirmative questions, can help create a positive environment.

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Appreciative inquiry builds on the “positive psychology” movement that began with Seligman in the late 1990s. Seligman believed that psychology is the study of weaknesses and damage as well as strengths and virtue. Thus, treatment includes the traditional disease processes and the nurturing of the best in ourselves and each other. Appreciative inquiry, which emphasizes using affirmative questions, also employs the concepts of positive psychology to engage and encourage strengths and overcome weaknesses.

Affirmative or positive questions can help create a positive environment. Negative questions focus attention on what is wrong. Positive questions focus on solutions rather than problems. Asking and answering positive questions supports new ideas, alternatives, enthusiasm, and commitment from coworkers.

Positive questions can enhance communication and increase understanding and commitment within the work force. They can also lead staff toward growth and change. Positive questions encourage staff to share peak experiences, values, and dreams. They can also elicit stories that generate connections as well as

constructive thinking and actions. Affirmative questions mobilize the hearts and minds of staff in service to patients and peers. Positive or affirming questions:

- Help to forge personal connections, as they convey unconditional positive regard.
- Invite stories rather than opinions and judgments.
- Are personal, asking staff to describe incidents that matter or have meaning.
- Draw on life experiences, providing opportunities for learning and drawing meaning.
- Invoke mental images, supporting and encouraging thinking about powerful positive experiences.
- Are sometimes general or ambiguous, providing space and options.
- Walk staff through an inner journey, allowing them to interpret or even reconstruct.
- Are uplifting, creating positive images that inspire staff to consider new possibilities.
- Give the imagination free rein.
- Suggest action, supporting staff to consider immediate next steps.

Consider how you interact as an instructor or presenter and how many times questions are phrased in a negative way or focused on all that is wrong rather than what works. We have options when working with staff. Try being upbeat and positive.

When attempting to shift or

change behavior, it may be difficult to know exactly where to begin. A tool such as a laminated 3 × 5-inch card in your pocket or on your desk reminding you of the kinds of questions to ask to stimulate interaction, encourage staff thought, or gain information could be helpful. That card could contain the following questions:

1. What has to be done?
2. Can you explain the process?
3. How do you feel about it?
4. Can you explain that further?
5. What can I do to help or support you?
6. What makes you ask that question?
7. What are some of the things you learned from this experience?
8. What can be done to make this work better?
9. What key results are we seeking?
10. Can you remember when this kind of situation worked well?

These are fairly simple questions worded positively in the spirit of appreciative inquiry. Try using them for a week. You will be amazed by the kinds of interactions you create and the information you discover. These questions may even create an entirely different environment, atmosphere, or culture.

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