

**Tip # 47**  
**(Choice)**

*The greatest good you can do for another  
is not just to share your riches,  
but to reveal to him his own.*  
Benjamin Disraeli

*Freedom is not worth having  
if it does not include the  
freedom to make mistakes.*  
Mahatma Gandhi

How often have you heard, “He’s a control freak” or “I don’t have a choice”? These are common statements that show how important control and choice are in our lives. We humans do like control. When we have a degree of control over our environment, we are safer and we are more apt to get our needs met. So, of course, we prefer this. We naturally dig in our heels and resist when we sense that our control is being taken away or when we have few, if any, choices. Looked at this way, resistance behaviors when we are not in control can be seen as survival reactions.

Unfortunately, in the context of counseling for health behavior change, resistance usually means **resistance to adopting beneficial new behaviors**. How can we use this understanding of human nature to best help our clients?

One vital technique to minimize resistance is to **encourage personal choice and control**. Here are some examples of ways to empower our patients:

- At each visit, **offer choices** as often as possible. These may be relatively insignificant: which chair to sit in, which goal to work on first, or how soon to come for a return visit. This sets the tone for a collaborative relationship.
- **Ask permission** before offering advice. It takes only a few seconds to say, “I have some ideas about which foods will work best in that situation. Would you like to hear those now?”
- When patients want to pursue a behavior you do not believe will work or you even disapprove of, you could pause before giving your opinion. Begin with: “That is one of your choices” or “You could do that.” It is indeed the patient’s choice. No one is going to lock her up to keep her from doing it. **Acknowledging this choice** will likely make her more open to listening to your input. And then remember to ask permission before providing your opinion.
- When a patient comes back and has not made a change you expected, be willing to **look at what happened without judgment**: “Oh, that’s interesting! I wonder how that came about.”

- **Take care with your language.** “You should...” or “You have to...” or “You need to...” will usually elicit resistance. None of us likes being told what to do. When you have a professional opinion, offer it as an “I” statement. For example, “I have found that most patients on this medication feel better when they eat protein at each meal” instead of “You have to eat protein at each meal.”

Your patient’s behaviors are indeed much more in his control than yours, so acknowledge this to the patient and get back to what you can do to help him reach his goals. Find ways to **leave the patient with the choice and control** while you stay in a consultant role.

Excerpted from **Counseling Tips for Nutrition Therapists**

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