

Tip # 39
(Use of Imperatives)

*I have always sought to guide the future --
but it is very lonely sometimes trying to play God.*
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Examples of imperatives:

- “You *should* eat less saturated fat.”
- “You *have to* start exercising more often.”
- “You *ought to* plan menus before going food shopping.
- “You *need to* test your blood sugar at least four times a day.

I invite you to notice when people in your life use these phrases with you. What does it feel like? What is your initial reaction? Chances are your response is some version of digging in your heels and rebelling. To put your feelings into words they may be, “What do you mean I *should* do that? Who says?” Or “What do you mean I *have to*? Are you going to make me?” or “How do *you* know what *I* need?” These are normal, healthy human responses to being told what to do. We humans like choice and control over our lives. Wording that sounds imperative naturally elicits a healthy rebellion. I’m sure that when you use imperatives, you do not believe you are trying to *force* your clients to do what you say. Unfortunately, this is how it can feel to your client.

How can we avoid triggering this response in our clients?

- First, simply notice the times you use this kind of wording. Attempt to *not* change it yet, just jot a few of them down.
- Next, separate the truth from the word choice. You may believe strongly that if your client does the behavior you are suggesting that he will achieve the results he wants. You are most likely correct. You are the one trained in nutrition science, physiology, and food science. You also have worked with other clients and know what has helped them achieve their goals. The problem is how to communicate your good idea in such a way that it will most likely be considered.
- Play with switching your language away from an imperative. See what happens. Experiment with various wording and notice the responses you get. Instead of using the word “you,” as in “you should eat more carbs earlier in the day,” find a way to use the word “I.” It works best if your “I” statement is in a direct response to something the client has just said or truly wants. For example, “I have an opinion for how to lessen that urge to binge in the evening. Would you like to hear it?” When you believe something strongly, own it, say it. “I have seen over and over with my

- clients that when they add some carb foods to all their meals they are much less apt to binge in the evening.”
- You may feel like saying, “You *need to* eat meals at more consistent times.” Consider, “I hear you are frustrated with how erratic your blood sugars are. I have a few suggestions that I believe will bring you better numbers. Would you like to hear them and then you can choose which ones you will try out?”

I hope this is helpful.

Excerpted from **Counseling Tips for Nutrition Therapists**

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