The Art of Focused Conversation

(Constance Brooks, 10-2013) The concepts in this handout are based on the book “ The Art of Focused Conversation” (2000) edited by Brian Stanfield

A focused conversation is a conversation where two or more people enter a dialogue and reflect on (1) what is going on and what is not, what is there and what is not, (2) what is going on inside you as you observe and how you are reacting, what repels you and what delights you, (3) what that event, situation and your reaction mean to you, (4) and what decisions you make about that alone or together. A focused conversation is about gathering and sharing wisdom.

A focused conversation:

* Is a way to focus
* Provides for real listening
* Encourages understanding rather than criticism
* Helps discourage negative thinking
* Helps to get at both rational and emotional experiences
* Enables honesty

A focused conversation can be used in many situations:

* Collect data and ideas
* Discuss tough issues
* Reflect on important issues and events
* Reflect on accomplishments and failures, giving an opportunity for learning
* Explore levels of consensus in a group
* Avoid heated arguments
* Promote a productive discussion

A focused conversation has a rational aim and an experiential aim

The rational aim is the intent or goal of the conversation

The experiential aim is the inner impact or over-all experience of the conversation. For example, if you are working with a student, the rational aim might be to determine what actions the student can take to manage weight, deal with bullying, manage self-care of diabetes or engage in positive safe relationship. The experiential aim might be to provide an open listening safe and affirming environment to help motivate the student to change

If you are working with a parent to encourage enrolling in a health insurance plan, the rational aim might be to determine what actions the parent can take to accomplish health assurance or other access to care. The experiential aim might be to provide an open listening safe and affirming environment to motivate and or assist the parent in enrolling in a health insurance plan or access to care.

# Questions for a focused conversation

Objective level questions:

* Engage the five senses (sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch)
* Invite inclusive participation (when working individually and in groups)
* Get at the facts and objective data about how persons think about nutrition, exercise, and other self-care measures.

Reflective level questions:

* Acknowledge persons emotions around eating, exercise and safe/unsafe self-care choices
* Acknowledge the associations with emotions
* Invite persons to use their imagination as to how they might change to ways of healthy living

Interpretive level questions:

* Help to engage persons to share their experience and meaning
* Help to identify available options and possibilities for change to healthy/safe/joyful living

Decisional level questions:

* Help persons to understand how relevance and meaning leads to future decisions and action about their health care and self-care.

About questions:

* Ask open ended questions that cannot be answered yes or no
* Ask specific questions to help people focus
* Seek information rather than present
* Honor the person’s response
* Be non-judgmental
* Be sensitive to diversity

# **Example Questions**

**Objective questions:**

* What are the events that make following your eating plan a problem for you?
* What is an example of an approach that has worked for you in the past?
* What are the barriers for you in living a healthy life style?
* What comes to mind as the most difficult barrier to engaging in exercise?
* What are the things that help move you forward in living a healthy lifestyle?
* Who are the most important people that you need to support you to achieve your lifestyle change goals?
* What is not happening now that you think needs to happen?
* What information do you need to help you in your efforts to take care of yourself?
* How do you describe safe sex?
* What are some factors in a relationship?
* What were some times you were “left out”?
* When was a time you felt picked on by someone?
* What stands out for you as a reason to get insurance for your child?
* What keeps you from getting health insurance?

**Reflective questions:**

* What seems to be working well for you?
* What is most frustrating for you?
* What concerns you most?
* Where do you have difficulty?
* What are you most doubtful about?
* What was really easy?
* What seems most critical?
* What is the most important thing for you in a relationship?
* How do you feel when you are excluded from a group?
* How do you feel when someone bullies you?
* What is an important reason for you to get health insurance for your child?
* What is most frustrating for you in thinking about enrolling in Medicaid or the affordable care act?

**Interpretive questions:**

* What are the implications of a lifestyle change for you?
* How will a change in your lifestyle that includes more exercise and eating healthy impact you?
* What are some of the real issues?
* What is most important to you about your health?
* What would make this easier?
* What needs to be dealt with first?
* What opportunities do you have for change?
* What are the options open to you?
* What difference will eating healthy make?
* What difference will exercising more have for you?
* What other things do you need to consider?
* What are your values?
* What is important to you?
* What kinds of changes do you need to make?
* What kind of decisions do you need to make?
* What are some ways you could deal with a person who acts like a bully?
* What are some options for you when you are left out of a group?
* What does living a healthy lifestyle mean for you in the future?
* What do you see as the best options for you in getting access to health care for your child?

**Decisional questions:**

* What actions will you take to develop a healthy lifestyle?
* What do you see as your next steps?
* What is your highest priority?
* Who else do you need to involve?
* What will you do differently?
* What are you really committed to?
* How will you act the next time some picks on you or teases you or harasses you?
* How can you go about getting health insurance for your child
* What or who do you need to help you in getting health insurance or access to care for your child?
* What might I do to help you taking steps to get health insurance or health care for your child?

**Affirming closing statements in your conversation:**

* You have recognized some important insights
* It sounds like you have thought this through really well
* Your plan sounds like one that will work.
* It looks like you have some more planning to do and you are well on your way.
* You have a great start, check in with me if I can help you.
* You have made an important decision to explore getting health insurance for your child. This is not easy. I commend you for putting the effort into this task.