

# Prepare for a behavioral interview, then ace it!

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**By reflecting on your past experiences before an interview, you'll be better prepared to respond to an interviewer's questions.**

WHEN AN INTERVIEWER says, "Tell me about a time when..." or "Give me a specific example of..." you're experiencing a behavioral interview. You need to be prepared to respond to these questions because many employers use a behavioral interview as part of the hiring process for nursing positions.

In fact, the number of employers using behavioral interviews has increased exponentially over the past 20 years: 65% of Fortune 500 companies are using behavioral interviews today compared with only about 5% in the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

Nursing school prepared you to become an excellent nurse, but it may not have taught you how to effectively prepare for nursing job interviews. To fill the gap, this article presents six successful strategies to assist you as you prepare for a nursing interview. For more on behavioral interviews, see *Predicting the future*.

## Strategy one: Research

One of the most important steps is to research your future employer. Its website, which is usually a good starting point, may provide the institution's mission and vision statement, current nursing position openings, nursing specialties, and interview information.

After you find this information, you'll need to determine what type of interview the employer practices. If this isn't revealed on the website, contact the human resources department to find out if you'll need to prepare for a behavioral interview.



## Strategy two: Find questions

As you begin preparing for a behavioral interview, collect a list of sample questions, preferably specific to the nursing profession. Search for them on the Internet and on the employer's website,

which may provide sample behavioral interview questions. A few examples from employer websites include the following:

- "Tell me about a time you had to go above and beyond at work to get a job done."
- "Tell me about a time you succeeded. Give an example."

Don't underestimate the power of networking when it comes to interview preparation. Ask your peers and mentors for advice on how to prepare for a behavioral interview. Interview preparation courses may be available as well, either through your current employer or an outside agency.

## Strategy three: Brainstorm

Once you have a list of sample behavioral interview questions, you'll notice that the questions may be divided into

## Predicting the future

The *behavioral interview* can best be defined as "an analysis of a candidate's potential ability by examining skills used in past performance."<sup>4</sup> In other words, it's based on the theory that the best predictor of future performance is past performance. In 1982, psychologist Tom Janz compared the traditional interview with what he termed the *behavior descriptive interview*. The results of his study proved that the behavioral interview was significantly more accurate than the traditional interview.<sup>5</sup>

performance skills or competencies. Common performance skills sought through a behavioral interview and a related question include:

- **coping or conflict.** “Tell me about a time when you’ve experienced conflict in the work setting. How did you resolve the issue?”
- **teamwork.** “Give me an example of a time when your work group or department worked especially well with another work group or department to accomplish a goal.”
- **flexibility.** “Tell me about a time where you had to adapt to a change in the workplace over which you had no control.”
- **initiative.** “Give an example of a time when you anticipated problems and were able to influence a new direction.”

Take some time to brainstorm about your past clinical experiences, work experiences, team projects, committee work, and interactions with patients, colleagues, and supervisors. Write down experiences that stand out in your memory and record how you dealt with those situations.

Once you start this process, you’ll be amazed at how many situations you remember. This process will prepare you for the day of your interview, giving you several examples to draw from instead of being put on the spot and coming up empty.

#### Strategy four: Prepare to respond

Next, develop a consistent and comprehensive process for answering each behavioral interview question. The SHARE Model is one tool that will guide you through a process to specifically answer questions in a consistent manner:<sup>2</sup>

- S** Describe a specific **S**ituation.
- H** Identify **H**indrances or challenges.
- A** Explain the **A**ction that you took.
- R** Discuss the **R**esults or outcome.
- E** Evaluate or summarize what you learned.

Your answer to each behavioral interview question should address all of these topics. Preparing for your interview using

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this process will let you provide a comprehensive answer to each question and alert the interviewer that you came prepared.

#### Strategy five: Understand the score

A unique feature of the behavioral interview is how the interviewer scores it. A standardized scoring tool is often used to provide a consistent scoring system for each interview conducted. The scoring tool may be customized for unit specialty or specific competencies and should help reduce personal bias and variability. Each response on your behavioral interview is scored from 5 (very strong evidence that a skill is present) to 1 (very strong evidence that a skill isn’t present).

Understanding how the interviewer will score the interview reinforces the need to cover every aspect of the interview questions you’re asked.

#### Strategy six: Keep it legal

Federal laws guide what employers may and may not ask during your interview. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibits all pre-employment medical inquiries involving your past or present medical conditions. However, although questions about medical conditions are out of bounds, an interviewer may ask if you’re able to perform the physical requirements of the job.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national

origin.<sup>3</sup> In general, any questions about your personal life are also protected under federal law and you can’t be forced to answer them.

#### Interview tips

You’ve worked hard to prepare for your big day! As with any type of interview or encounter with a future employer, making a professional impression is crucial to your success. Here are some final tips to enhance your interview success:

- Confirm the time, date, and location of your interview. If you can, practice driving to the site ahead of time so you won’t get lost and be late for the interview.
- Rehearse your answers with a coworker, friend, or family member.
- Review your resume and make sure it’s current.
- Dress in business attire and arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Bring copies of your resume, transcripts, and cover letter if requested.
- Prepare at least two questions to ask the interviewer.
- Relax, smile, and be yourself. Remember, this is your time to shine.
- After your interview, promptly send a thank-you letter via e-mail or regular mail.

Preparation is the key to a successful behavioral interview. By following these strategies, you’ll increase your chances of hearing these welcome words: “We’d like to offer you the position.” ■

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