

Life's Many Questions



Have you ever had a slow day at the office? You know what I mean, one of those days where the weather is bad and the patients don't show up, or maybe it's a day where the weather is beautiful and the patients cancel their appointments to enjoy nature instead of going to the dentist. Sometimes it's just a day when you can't correlate anything with the weather, but for one reason or another, you find yourself with spare time. What do you do on those days?

I have a proposal. The proposal is that we use that unexpected free time to challenge ourselves to think deeply. Imagine this like a short sabbatical. Use this time to stimulate your brain, because the more you challenge yourself, the better the brain performs.

Of course, the challenge has to be stimulating enough that you really have to work at it. What you need is to think about questions that are provocative in nature. So now, you're supposed to ask yourself, "What is a provocative question?"

Is a provocative question just the right way to ask an important question? For example, in clinical research we often describe the benefits of a PICO question. We know that these specific research questions provide a path toward unbiased answers. In research, we formulate questions around the four letters of the term "PICO." P is the study population, I is for intervention, C is the comparison, and O is the outcome. As I write this, I can hear music playing in my ears when I say those words. Maybe not; maybe I think I'm hearing the words of legendary English musician Sir Ray Davies singing about "Lola." Sorry, I just fell into the pit of despair also known as lateral thinking.

Is that it? Is the provocative question something different than the important question, the critical question, or the right question as it applies to research? Can we define a provocative question without knowing the answer, or is there no one answer to the provocative question? Is the provocative question a question that brings on another question and another question after that? Is a provocative question the question that makes you think in creative ways, making you think at 90 to 180 degrees from the normal thought process? Can I ever answer that question without knowing what the "normal" thought process is?

Is it a comfortable question? Picture this: we meet for breakfast and I say to you, "Good morning, and how are you today?" About the last thing that I truly expect in response to that question is a real answer.

We never expect the person who we queried in that way to respond with a comprehensive answer. What would we do if they start talking about their job or their finances or, heaven forbid, their personal life? We would respond to their responses by calling the waitress to get that next cup of coffee, and you might want to make the pot endless because our question seemed to open a series of responses, many of which are uncomfortable for us, the initiators of the question.

Fortunately, we don't see this happening very often. Indeed, this is not a provocative question with a purely factual, comprehensive answer. Instead, it's a description of a figurative question with a literal response. The figurative question is intended to be an icebreaker, a way to open conversation in which all parties normally understand that the response should be short and relatively uneventful. The more descriptive a response becomes, the more detail the response provides, the less comfortable the conversation becomes. Figurative comments should evoke similar responses; as soon as the response becomes literal, people often find their minds wandering as their eyes search for an exit strategy.

It appears that there are many questions we encounter in life. Most can be stated simply and responded to quickly. Rarely will the regular daily questions excite or enthrall us. Provocative questions differ in that they demand attention from many different aspects. There are no two-dimensional provocative questions. Likewise, there are no short answers to these questions.

The clear definition of the provocative question remains elusive. Justice Potter Stewart might say that he knows a provocative question when he sees it, but for the rest of us, such a question may be as difficult to define as it is to answer. In comparison to most other questions that we encounter in life, provocative questions are rarely stated clearly or answered comprehensively. For now, we might say that provocative questions have the capacity to open the doors for unencumbered thought and remain as a healthy activity in the face of unexpected free time.

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