5 Most Common Interview Questions

Wouldn’t it be great to know what you were going to be asked at your next job interview? Short of asking the scheduler to share the questions, candidates are left to their own devices when it comes to preparing for these very important meetings. Luckily, some questions are so commonly asked that you can expect to encounter them in most, if not all of your interviews. These “evergreens” serve as multi-purpose queries for employers, as useful when hiring residents as they are for evaluating the next chief of staff.

Curious? Following are five of the most common questions you’re likely to be asked, along with mistakes to avoid and strategies for providing the best answers.

**QUESTION 1: WHY DON’T YOU TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF?**

*Mistakes to avoid:* Most often coming at the beginning of the interview, this friendly-sounding query can spell disaster for candidates who use their answer to recite facts already clearly denoted in the CV. Repeating known information isn’t the mistake—that nearly always happens in interviews. But starting at the beginning of your college career and marching resolutely forward year by year is a sure way to anesthetize your audience. Instead of opening the meeting with a charge, this fact + fact + fact approach drains the energy from the room.

*Better strategies:* There are several good ways to handle this question. For example, you can provide personal context by starting with an origins angle: “As you know, I’m from India, where I took my initial training. My mother and two of my brothers are all doctors, and I grew up hearing medical ethics discussed at the dinner table…” The trick with this answer is to move through the introduction relatively quickly so you can include details about your most recent work or study, while still leaving time for an ending comment that relates to the job: “…which is why I was so interested in talking with you today about this opening. It feels like a good fit for my goals and an opportunity to help your patients by adding my specialization to your practice.”

If sharing your roots in medicine doesn’t appeal to you, another winning formula is to identify core strengths that you’ll bring to the position: “You already have my CV with my education and training, so I’ll jump forward to the main things I think I can offer in this position…” To make the answer more personal and relevant, be sure one of the three items is a personal trait, such as leadership or thoroughness. Another item might be a particular strength in your work, such as making accurate diagnoses or working well with patients’ families. And a third point can encompass training or work experience directly related to the job you’re currently discussing.

With either this strengths-based strategy or the personal story, you’ll be setting the stage for a warm, relevant introduction to the interview.

**QUESTION 2: WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS?**

*Mistakes to avoid:* This isn’t a tricky question until you remember the context. As a physician, you are almost certainly above average. But as you probably discovered in medical school, the “average” keeps moving up. Answers to avoid when asked about strengths would include things like “I’m a fast learner” or “I can handle a lot of stress.” At this stage of your career, those are nearly entry-level skills.

*Better strategies:* Dig deeper to find the strengths beneath the surface answer. For example, if you’re able to handle a lot of stress, why is that? Are you especially good at analyzing situations and prioritizing or delegating so the stress is evenly distributed? Or perhaps you’re blessed with a calm demeanor that enhances your ability to take each challenge one at a time. If you can dig a little deeper when naming your strength, you’ll open the door to a compelling follow-on sentence: “I have a natural aptitude for handling stressful situations, which I do by analyzing the circumstances and prioritizing the steps. I’m able to do this quite quickly, which has been helpful in situations where the patient flow can surge unpredictably…”
QUESTION 3: WHAT ARE YOUR WEAKNESSES?

Mistakes to avoid: This is an easy question to answer poorly, with the least strategic answers being either too glib or too honest. On the glib side are answers like, “I don’t really have any weaknesses because I work to constantly improve.” What? That doesn’t sound credible. On the too-honest side would be something like, “I have trouble with my temper when I get stressed.” Disaster—why would you bring that up?

Better strategies: Luckily, this is also an easy question to answer well, using one of two approaches. First, you can scan the job posting and choose the task for which you feel the least prepared. In the interview, your answer might sound like this: “Related to this job, I think my weak spot will be managing the entries for the electronic medical records. I’m comfortable with technology, so I don’t anticipate having trouble learning. But I haven’t had extensive exposure to all the levels of EMR. If you can provide me with an online tutorial or access to a co-worker for assistance, I think I can come up to speed fairly quickly.”

The other approach is to refer to a personal weakness rather than something in the posting. In this case, frame your answer away from the word “weakness” and toward improvement. For example, “One area where I’m proud of making improvements is my ability to work with the families of patients. At first I was very intimidated by having family members present during patient examinations but I learned some tips from other physicians for giving the family the information they need without impacting the schedule too seriously. I’m still working on this skill, but I hope to move it from weakness to strength with some more practice.”

QUESTION 4: WHERE DO YOU PLAN TO BE IN FIVE YEARS?

Mistakes to avoid: This is another case where being too honest can hold you back. If you’re talking with an employer on the “wrong” side of the country, for example, it’s not very strategic to answer, “Anywhere but here.” And it’s not necessarily accurate, either, as candidates sometimes grow attached to locations they had expected to dislike. Nor do you want to say something vague, such as, “I’m hoping to be better at my job and serving patients well.” That sounds very similar to, “I don’t have any real plans for my future.”

Better strategies: Employers ask this question to gauge whether the job in question is aligned with the candidate’s goals, and to learn how quickly candidates want to move forward and in which direction. To give them what they need without revealing feelings or plans best kept to yourself, go for something specific but not overly personal. For example, “I understand this university has applications out for several research grants in my area. At some point it would be my goal to participate in the grant-writing process and to possibly head some of the research efforts. I don’t know if that fits inside a five-year timeframe, but that’s the direction I’m hoping to go in.”

QUESTION 5: WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS (PRACTICE, HOSPITAL, SPECIALTY)?

Mistakes to avoid: For most candidates, the content of this answer isn’t a problem—you generally know why you chose certain paths and you can readily share that information. But answers will go awry if you bog down the conversation with too much background, or if you don’t seem to have a very compelling reason for the choice. For example, this answer is weak: “I’ve always been fascinated with multiple sclerosis, ever since my favorite aunt was diagnosed with it.” That may be honest but it doesn’t give the interviewer much to work with in terms of your motivation for the work.

Better strategies: If you wanted to reference your aunt’s diagnosis, a better answer would be: “When I was in high school, my aunt was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. That provided the spark for my interest in the specialty but I’ve stayed engaged because of the variety of approaches underway for finding treatments and a cure. As a practitioner, I want to be able to share those options with patients when it’s appropriate, which is why I’ve been interested in what you’re doing here.” This answer is stronger because it gives a more mature perspective of an evolving engagement with the topic, while also tying the answer back to the job at hand.

Whatever questions you encounter in your next interview—and it’s almost certain some of these will be on the list—just remember to pause a moment before answering. When you take a few seconds to organize your thoughts, you’re more likely to answer thoughtfully and strategically. For more tips on preparing interview answers, you can review the article “Strength-based Interviewing” on the Academy’s Neurology Career Center website.