

Nursing Behavioral Interview Questions - Themes

Most behavioral interview questions asked to nurses are based around the following themes / transferable skills:

- Teamwork
- Patient-care
- Adaptability
- Time management
- Communication style
- Motivation and core values

Key to Answering Behavioral-Based Questions

When telling stories during interviews, we suggest using the S-T-A-R format - this will ensure your story is direct, concise and to the point. So, what does the acronym **S-T-A-R** stand for?

Situation – give context

Task – what were you tasked with

Action-steps – what steps did you take

Results – share the outcomes or what you learned

Sample Questions: Teamwork

Interviewers are wanting to envision how you will fit in with their team and how you work well with various personalities. We suggest telling a story about a time you dealt with a co-worker who had a conflicting personality, a disagreement within your healthcare team, or a challenging patient case involving your team. Always remember to talk about what you learned from the situation and if anything positive came from it.

1. Describe a situation when you had to work closely with a difficult coworker. How did you handle the situation? Were you able to build a relationship with this person?

How to answer:

Never talk badly about anyone during an interview. Explain the situation and why the individual was difficult. Share how you handled the situation. Try to turn anything negative into a positive. What did you learn from the situation? What might you do differently now? What was the “silver lining”? Were you able to talk through your differences? Did you become friends?

Working closely with difficult coworkers can be challenging but it is important to remember the patient, their care, and family is the most important. Putting aside differences is essential for all nurses because not everyone is the same. Sometimes this means not discussing specific topics such as religion or politics at work. With that being said, not everyone will become friends in the workplace but working together is key for the successful care of the patients.

2. Talk about a conflict within your healthcare team. What was the conflict and how did you handle it?

How to answer:

Explain the conflict surrounding the situation. Who was involved? What was your role? Did anything positive come from this? What did you learn?

Conflict often occurs in the hospital setting particularly between new nurses and more seasoned staff as well as doctors and nurses. One specific time, there was concern from a parent that a newer nurse was not monitoring a patient's breathing postoperatively as closely as she would have liked. I was covering the nurse for lunch and the mother brought her concerns to me. I discussed and validated her concerns. Once the nurse was back from lunch, I spoke with her regarding the mother's concerns. The nurse was very upset and felt it was not my place to say anything to her regarding this. A parent or patient's concerns should never be dismissed. I spoke to the nurse educator on the unit to use the opportunity as a teaching moment.

3. Describe a time when you were particularly proud of your healthcare team? What was your role in this situation?

How to answer:

Describe the circumstances and actions step-by-step. What happened to make you feel proud? What was your role? Who was involved? What was the result?

Working in the ICU setting there are countless moments that make me proud to be a nurse and proud to be part of this amazing community. Watching a patient survive a code, take their first steps on prosthetic legs, or being in the room when a patient I told they are receiving a new heart are the moments we all want to be a part of. Even if I am not delivering the news or care personally, the information my patient receives directly affects me.

4. Tell me about a time you stepped into a leadership role.

How to answer:

This doesn't need to be anything official. Think about a time when you stepped up to the plate and took charge of a situation. What was the circumstance? What made you take the lead? Who was involved? Did any opportunities arise from this situation?

I have acted as charge nurse numerous times in my career. I have had to lead code teams, respond to rapid responses and make difficult staffing decisions. As a charge nurse I have determined patient assignments to ensure that assignments are fair and equal. Furthermore, I have to ensure that the nurses' skill set is sufficient for the assignment.

Become a Part of the Nurse.org Community!

Get the latest on all things nursing by joining our email newsletter. You'll be the first to know about nursing news, trending topics and educational resources.



Sample Questions: Patient Care

Healthcare hiring professionals want to hire nurses who provide excellent patient care. Education is of utmost importance to healthcare employers. We suggest telling stories about times you provided top-notch patient care or went out of your way to educate patients and/or their families.

1. Tell me about a time when a patient's family was dissatisfied with your care. How did you handle that situation?

How to answer:

Make sure to explain the situation in detail including both perspectives (the patient's family and yours). Never talk badly about patients or their families. Take ownership if you indeed did something wrong. Share any positives that came from this - what did you learn? What would you do differently now? How did you turn this into a positive?

I once was floated to a unit that I had never worked in and wasn't sure where supplies were located. The mother of the patient did not recognize me as a regular floor nurse on the unit and this already made the family leery of me from the start of the shift. I continually had to prove myself throughout the day because as nurses we all do things slightly differently. There is not always a wrong way or a right way to do things but in this case, there was a policy to be followed. I followed it and apparently my dressing change was slightly different than previous ones. I communicated regularly with the charge nurse and she came to check in with the family to address any issues in real-time.

2. What approach do you take in communicating with people who do not know medical jargon? Give an example of a time you explained medical terminology to someone who is not medically trained.

How to answer:

Explain step-by-step how you've performed in a similar situation. What specific words and terminology did you use? How did you know that the individual understood your explanation? It is imperative that we use simple words to our patients and families who are not medically trained and utilize a teach-back method to ensure they understand the information that is communicated to them. I once had to explain post-operative care to a family whose child had tonsil surgery. I had to use words such as poop instead of bowel movement. I used Tylenol instead of acetaminophen.

3. Describe a time you provided effective patient or family education.

How to answer:

Tell a story about a time when you knew your patient or family retained your teachings. How did you know that you effectively communicated the piece of education?

After teaching families I ask them to repeat the information in their own words. Using a teach-back method allows nurses to know if families truly understood the information that was given to them. It is also important to provide the family with written educational material and use other forms of education such as videos or hands-on when possible. I taught a family post-operative spine care after a posterior spinal fusion. The parents were able to properly

demonstrate how to transfer their child from the bed to the chair. In doing so, I was able to determine that they had retained the information.

4. Talk about a time a patient or their family were particularly pleased and appreciative of your care.

How to answer:

Tell a story about a family who was happy with your care. What did you do in particular that they were pleased with? How did you know they were happy? What were the results of this situation?

Working in pediatrics can be challenging but also very rewarding. There are times that parents are unable to stay at the bedside 24/7 because of work, other children, or previous commitments. I was taking care of a 6-month-old twin during a specific shift. The family was unable to be at the bedside because the father had to work and the mother was at home with the twin sister and the other children. I spent my shift playing with the infant with age-appropriate toys and when the mother called to check in – I put the phone next to the infant. The mother was able to hear her baby laughing while singing to her. This brought them closer together and the mother to tears. She stated that no other nurse had done that during the hospitalization and she was eternally grateful.

5. Give an example of a time you had to interact with a hostile patient. How did you handle the situation and what was the outcome?

How to answer:

Tell a story about a hostile patient and your step-by-step actions. What was the patient doing that was hostile? How did you react? How did you feel? What procedures did you follow to interact with the patient? What was the result of your actions?

Unfortunately, hostile patients often are part of the job. It's important to remember some of the patients are being hostile because they are in pain, away from family, and in the hospital setting. There was a time a patient refused to take her medication. I tried everything but she would spit them out at me when she tried to take them. Because of this behavior, I involved my charge nurse, the physician in charge of her care, and social worker. After many conversations and phone calls, it was determined the patient was spitting the medication out because she liked it mixed in chocolate pudding. The woman was elderly and suffered from dementia. It was only after speaking with the social worker did we learn of her medication preference. She was not able to communicate with us her wants and needs and this led to hostility.

6. Describe a time you were faced with a patient who chose not to communicate or disclose important information. How did you handle the situation and what was the outcome?

How to answer:

Tell a story about a patient you worked within a similar situation. What step-by-step actions did you take to obtain the information from the patient? What were the results of your actions?

A parent once didn't disclose that the father of the child was not her current boyfriend. This was important as the patient was going to need consent forms signed and legally, this boyfriend was not able to sign the consent forms. Additionally, there was a man calling the unit claiming to be the father of the child. Social work and the nurse manager were notified. Through an open conversation, the mother disclosed the correct identity of the father. While I personally did not discover the information, it is essential to know the resources that are available to you and utilize them to the best of your ability.

Show Me Nursing Programs

Sample Questions: Adaptability

The nursing profession is one of constant urgency, crisis, and uncertainty. Tell stories of challenges and follow up with key takeaways and learned lessons.

1. Tell me about a time you were under a lot of pressure. What was going on, and how did you get through it?

How to answer:

Tell a story about a time you were stressed and under pressure to perform. Explain the situation and why you felt pressured. Describe step-by-step the actions you took to make it through the situation. What was the result? What did you learn? What might you do differently now?

I was the most senior nurse in the unit by over a decade. I had to not only handle my patient assignment but I also was to act as a resource to the other newer nurses on the unit. I had to make sure my time management was great as well as my ability to drop everything and help someone else. I had to stay organized otherwise I would not have been able to assist others.

2. Describe a time when your facility was undergoing some change. How did that impact you, and how did you adapt?

How to answer:

Talk about a time your facility changed. Maybe they were acquired by another facility. Perhaps they transitioned to a new computer system. Describe the change and the steps you took to adapt to such change.

One healthcare system I worked for switched from paper charting to electronic medical records and computerized charting. During this transition, it was confusing and often overwhelming. I was able to adapt quickly but unfortunately, some of my coworkers were not able to.

3. Tell me about a time when you didn't know the answer to something at work? How did you go about finding the information?

How to answer:

Tell a story about a time when you did not know the answer. Explain step-by-step the action you took to find the information. Talk about the result of your actions.

As nurses, there is no way that we possibly can know everything. Knowing who to go for help is the first step. At the beginning of every shift, I identify a nurse that I can use as a resource

such as the charge nurse, nurse educator, or unit resource nurse. This individual is generally someone that is more senior with an advanced skill set. If I am unable to get the answer from them or they are busy I look at the healthcare systems policy and procedure manager. If there is a concern regarding a medication dosage or interaction, I look to Lexi-Comp.

4. Give me an example of an awkward situation at work. How did you remove yourself from the situation?

How to answer:

Tell a story about an uncomfortable situation. What was the situation and why did it feel awkward. Explain the steps you took to leave the situation. What were the results of your actions? What did you learn?

I once had a teenage male patient make very inappropriate sexual comments towards me. At first, I ignored them thinking it was a one-time thing. The second time, I told him that the comments were inappropriate and I did not want him to say those things to me. The third time, I left the patient's room and went directly to the charge nurse. I explained the situation and how uncomfortable I was in that specific situation and caring for the patient. She gathered a team to speak to the patient. My assignment was switched for the remainder of the shift.

5. Tell me about a time you failed. How did you deal with this situation?

How to answer:

Share a story about when you experience failure. Talk about your feelings and why you felt that you failed. Discuss anything positive that came from this failure? What did you learn from failing? What might you do differently now?

Failing is one of the worst feelings in the world, either professionally or personally. Working in the ICU setting, patients die. We fail them when this happens. I fail them when this happens. After every death, there is a debriefing to discuss what went well and what could have been done differently. I take that time to reflect on my participation in the event and if there was something I could have done differently. Failure doesn't equal weakness. It simply is something that we must improve upon.

6. Describe a time when you anticipated potential problems with a patient and initiated preventative measures.

How to answer:

Share a specific story about a patient. Explain how you assessed the pending problems. Describe step-by-step the actions you took to prevent the problem. What was the result of your actions?

Become a Part of the Nurse.org Community!

Get the latest on all things nursing by joining our email newsletter. You'll be the first to know about nursing news, trending topics and educational resources.



Sample Questions: Time Management

Nurses are masters at multitasking - for example, managing multiple patients, administering medication on time while maintaining detailed notes. Tell stories about your punctuality, ability to meet deadlines and how you remain organized through it all.

1. Talk about a time you worked in a fast-paced setting. How do you prioritize tasks while maintaining excellent patient care?

How to answer:

Give an example of a time you had to prioritize your tasks quickly. Explain your thought process in detail and why you chose to complete the duties in such an order.

Working in an ICU setting is extremely fast-paced and it is essential to prioritize your tasks for the day. At the beginning of the shift, I make a to-do list with everything that needs to be accomplished. I put the must-do things at the top of the list and the things I would like to do at the bottom. Administering medications are placed at the top of the list and washing a patient's hair is further down. While I would love to accomplish everything, it just isn't possible.

2. Describe your experience with a very ill patient who required a lot of your time. How did you manage this patient's care while ensuring your other patients were adequately cared for?

How to answer:

Talk about the patient's care and why they needed much of your time. What was the illness, trauma or injury? How did you ensure that this patient received quality care? How did you manage your other patients?

Delegation is key here. Knowing when to ask for help is important. Without identifying resources and asking for help, it is impossible to succeed.

3. Talk about a time when you felt overwhelmed with your work or patient-load. What did you do?

How to answer:

Give a specific example of a time you were overwhelmed. Explain step-by-step the actions you took to overcome this feeling and to focus on the task at hand.

During these situations, I asked for help. Without identifying resources and asking for help, it is impossible to succeed.

4. Give an example of an important goal you set for yourself. Did you accomplish that goal? How did you ensure that you accomplished it?

How to answer:

Make sure the goal you share is related to your career. Explain the steps you took to accomplish your goal. What challenges did you face? How did you feel once you accomplished your goal?

I set the goal to earn my pediatric certification. I made a list of things that must be done to achieve that. I signed up for the exam and paid the fee so that way I had to take the exam. There was no backing out.

Sample Questions: Communication Style

It is important to convey your particular communication style and techniques. Tell stories about specific times you either had difficulty communicating or times you communicated well. If you can, walk through your step-by-step thought process and give examples.

1. Give an example of a time when you were able to successfully persuade a patient to agree to something. How did you persuade this person?

How to answer:

Tell a story about a specific time when you had a difficult time getting a patient to agree to something at work. What was the situation and what did they need to agree to? What specific actions did you take to get them to agree? What was the result?

Ideally, we never want to persuade a patient to do something. We would like the patient to agree to it freely. However, I did bargain with a child that if he ate his breakfast I would play video games with him afterward. Using a bargaining system worked well to ensure the patient was well nourished.

2. Describe a time when you were the resident medical expert. What did you do to make sure everyone was able to understand you?

How to answer:

Tell a story about a time when others were relying on your medical expertise. Talk about the specific circumstances and words you used to ensure that they understood the language. What did you talk about? What was the result?

3. Tell me about a time when you had to rely on written communication to explain yourself to your team or to a patient.

How to answer:

Talk about a time when you successfully relied on written (or typed) communication. What were the circumstances? What was being discussed? How did you ensure success?

Most hospitals utilize a text feature to relay quick communication to the medical team. It is important to be concise and give all of the important information. This way the medical team can determine the best course of action.

4. Talk about a time when you had not communicated well. How did you correct the situation?

How to answer:

No one is perfect, we all have flaws. Discuss a time when you experienced miscommunication at work. What were the circumstances? How did you know you did not communicate well? What did you learn? What were the results?

This often happens when there is a language barrier. I learned that it is always better to ask for an in-person interpreter or utilizing a computer translation software. This ensures there is no miscommunication of information. Unfortunately, hand gestures and speaking louder doesn't always work.

5. Describe a time when you received negative feedback and turned it into something positive.

How to answer:

Discuss a time at work when you received negative feedback. What was the feedback and circumstances surrounding the feedback? Who gave you the negative feedback? How did it make you feel? What did you do as a result of the feedback?

I was once told that I needed to be more social at work and try and bond with my work colleagues. I disagreed with my manager because I felt that we are there to work and take care of our patients, not to make friends. Becoming close friends with coworkers is an added bonus. While I didn't become best friends with anyone from the unit, I was able to spend downtime reading and studying to earn additional certifications which helped me secure better jobs and opportunities in nursing.

Sample Questions: Motivation and Core Values

With these questions, interviewers are trying to get to the root of your motivation and personal values. When answering such questions you should tell motivational stories from your life that convey your core values.

1. What is one professional accomplishment that you are most proud of and why?

How to answer:

Tell a story about one of your most noteworthy accomplishments at work. What was the accomplishment? What steps did you take to achieve it? Who else was involved in this accomplishment? What happened as a result of the accomplishment?

Earning my advanced pediatric certification is something I worked very hard for and something that validates the years I have spent at the bedside.

2. Talk about a challenging situation or problem where you took the lead to correct it instead of waiting for someone else to do it.

How to answer:

Talk about a time when you decided to take the initiative to complete a task or make an important decision. What was your motivator? What action steps did you take? What were the results of your actions?

3. Have you ever felt dissatisfied with your work as a Nurse? What could have been done to make it better?

How to answer:

Most nurses encounter difficulties while working. Talk about a time when you felt dissatisfied with your work. What were the circumstances and what happened? What was your role? Why did you feel dissatisfied? What would you do differently now? What did you learn?

I once became extremely dissatisfied because I was consistently being given easier assignments and not being given the ICU level patients. It became frustrating and while I understood that others needed to learn and gain experience it quickly left me annoyed with my position, the unit, and the healthcare system. I sat down and spoke to my nurse manager about my concerns and to inquire why it was happening. The nurse manager was not aware of the situation and it was later determined that a few of the charge nurses were giving the sicker patients to their friends and not spreading them out amongst the nurses.

4. Describe a time when you went over and above your job requirements. What motivated you to put forth the extra effort?

How to answer:

Talk about a specific instance when you went out of your way for your job or for a patient. What were the circumstances? Why did you choose to take the action? What did you do? What were the results?

I personally feel like I give 110% to all of my patients every shift but there was one that I grew especially close with. For some reason, the patient had been dropped off by a family member and no one had come to see the child for months. It was obvious the patient was missing key developmental milestones and was becoming increasingly lonely and depressed. I asked to become the primary nurse for the patient which meant every time I worked he would be assigned to me. I worked with him over several months to get him potty trained and to improve his vocabulary. I don't know exactly why I was extra motivated but at that time in our lives, the patient and I needed each other.

5. Give an example of a mistake you've made? How did you handle it?

How to answer:

It is important to admit that you make mistakes and to own up to them. Talk about the specific mistake and why it happened. What was your role in the mistake? How did you know that you made a mistake? Who was involved? What did you learn? What have you done to improve? What were the results?

Mistakes are part of nursing, whether we like to admit to it or not. It's important to learn from those mistakes and become a better nurse. One mistake that I will never forget is leaving the gastronomy tube unclamped with medication administration. Because it was unclamped when I opened the port to give the next medication, the last medication, as well as formula, came out. I was unable to clamp it quickly enough and the medications I had already given were leaking onto the bed. I had to speak with the medical team and pharmacy to discuss replacing them. I have never forgotten to clamp the gastronomy tube again.

6. What do you find most difficult about being a Nurse? How do you overcome this difficulty?

How to answer:

Be honest and talk about the most difficult component of nursing. Maybe it's working with a specific patient population. Or, acting in a leadership role. Whatever it is to you, always make sure to talk about the steps and actions you've taken to cope with the difficulty.

The most difficult aspect of being a nurse is watching a patient die, especially one that I have cared for when they were healthy. Watching the family lose a loved one is heartbreaking. Sometimes I sit in the bathroom and take a moment for myself to cry, to reflect, and to pause to remember the patient. Death is part of our everyday world and sometimes that is hard to remember.