

The real questions behind three challenging interview questions and how to answer them

Preparing and practicing your responses to interview questions is key to interviewing success. Several questions often asked by interviewers trip up applicants who haven't prepared for them. How you answer these questions can leave a quite positive — or negative — impression on the program interviewers. Here's advice for answering these questions effectively so you can maximize your chance for success.

What is your greatest strength? weakness? Interviewers ask this in nearly all interviews — internship, residency, and otherwise.

When interviewers ask this question, they're not really interested in a list of the things you do well and don't. They're more interested in knowing how well you know yourself — how accurately you can assess your own abilities.

Asking about strengths and weaknesses is sort of a silly question, assuming the normal interview situation, where the interviewers are not personally knowledgeable about your abilities. You could tell them almost anything, and they'd have no way of knowing what was true. So what you say is not as important as how you say it.

To successfully convey a strength, discuss something you do well and provide a concrete example that clearly displays that attribute. If the example you relate is also listed on your CV or in your personal statement, it lends greater credence to your answer. Your interviewer will learn how you ascribe worth and value. It's, in a sense, an evidence-based way of identifying your strengths.

To successfully convey a weakness, first know that you should certainly have at least one. No one is comfortable with a person who can identify no weakness in themselves.

But don't just pick any weakness you might have. Identify a personal issue with which you've struggled and with which you've devised a successful strategy for improvement. The important aspect of your answer is what you have done or are doing to improve yourself. Your interviewer will learn how you problem-solve and how you plan to continue the process of learning and growing.

In general, residency programs are attracted to individuals who know who they are, what they want, and where they're going. Your ability to self-evaluate your strengths and weaknesses is one critical component of this self-knowledge. Especially in this case, know what you're going to say before you're asked the question.

What are the personal characteristics or traits in people that you dislike or find unattractive? You likely haven't thought much about this question or had it posed to you this way. However, this issue is an important one in internship selection.

Everybody knows of certain people who annoy them. It's important you can recognize these traits, understand why they bother you, and — most importantly — be capable of working professionally with those individuals who express them.

In medicine, we don't choose our patients. And in internship and residency, you'll certainly see all types. You're expected to provide the same professional care for all patients. Internship applicants who recognize their professional duties are much more attractive than ones who don't.

We're also rarely able to choose our colleagues. Few things in life are more random than the match, and it's conceivable you'll be matched to a program with individuals who exhibit some traits you despise. How will you get along with them? What sort of conflict-resolution skills do you have? A residency program director is attracted to applicants who can do the job pleasantly and professionally, even with individuals they wouldn't necessarily choose as friends.

For example, if you've identified a difficulty working with colleagues who seem to shirk responsibility and fail to complete assigned tasks, consider how you dealt with such individuals (hopefully, successfully) in the past. Then consider that particular person as your intern in a couple of years. How would you apply your successful coping strategy to manage this new situation? This is not a question easily answered "off-the-cuff." Again, the more prepared you are, the more effective your response to this question will be.

Can you tell me about a patient you cared for who was particularly memorable? Fortunately, this question is much more straightforward — no hidden agenda. The interviewer wants to get a sense of your clinical reasoning skills. While that may feel a bit intimidating, this question can reap you great rewards because the interviewer has shifted the focus from you and your accomplishments to medicine and patient care.

Prepare a patient case within your discipline that you found particularly memorable, challenging, or educational. Present the patient to your interviewer in about 30–45 seconds, relating just the highlights and concluding with why the patient was so memorable or what you learned. You'll impress your interviewer with your ability to succinctly present a patient.

Additionally, since you prepared ahead of time, you will know absolutely everything about the patient's presentation, differential diagnosis, and management plans and can impress the interviewer with your knowledge and clinical acumen. If you're really lucky, you'll be assigned an interviewer who is an expert on the type of patient you're planning to discuss. Your advance

preparation will be impressive, and you'll have a shared experience with your interviewer that will make you a highly memorable candidate.

You'll undoubtedly be asked other questions about your CV, application, and past experiences, which you should be able to answer easily with very little preparation. However, devoting the time to prepare for these three particularly challenging questions will make your interviews more effective. Good luck!

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<https://www.aamc.org/cim/residency/application/interviewing/338086/interviewquestions.html>