

2-3 Critical Thinking

What is critical thinking?

Critical thinking is when you apply, analyze, and evaluate information you have gathered from the participant in order to guide what action you will take. As a certifier, critical thinking is important to make sure you are providing counseling, food packages, and referrals that are the most appropriate and useful for the participant.

It sounds easy, but it can be harder than you think.

For example, when you enter information into the data system, it is easy to assume that the result the computer gives you is correct. But what if you accidentally hit the wrong key? Critical thinking is when you see something and think, “that doesn’t look quite right, maybe I should double-check it.”

Why is critical thinking important?

The purpose of a WIC certification is to tailor WIC benefits and services to best help the participant meet their health goals. Your role is to find out what the participant wants and needs and match that to what WIC can offer.

Besides just avoiding errors, critical thinking also helps us look a little deeper at situations, so we can get to the root of an issue. In counseling, we are talking with participants about complicated and personal things like their medical history and their diet. They don’t usually start by giving us all the details – instead they give us generalizations. It is easy to make assumptions about what they are telling us. You use critical thinking to find out more and check your assumptions before you determine what action to take.

Critical thinking is not the same as being critical

Being critical is when you judge someone or something and find fault. It often includes giving unwanted suggestions and can be rude or angry. We don’t want that!

The basic steps of critical thinking

There are four basic steps to critical thinking.



Step 1. Collect all information

During a certification you will need to collect all the information you can, before you draw any conclusion or take any action. Some information will come from the conversation with the participant and may include answers to both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Other information will come from things you observe, like the participants' weight, height and blood test.

Things you hear participants say are considered **subjective**. Although you assume participants are telling you the truth, sometimes they tell you what they think you want to hear. Things you observe are **objective** and would be considered true or accurate.

Subjective
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information you collect from talking with the participant.• What they tell you about their health, diet, or living situation.

Objective
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Information you collect like weights, heights, or blood work.• What you learn by using your senses. For example: what you see, such as condition of clothing or marks on the participant; smells; or, behaviors you notice.

The WIC data system will help you decide what information you need to collect. Ultimately, you will have to decide what information is necessary and what is the best way to ask questions.

In this step, you would consider:

- What information do you need?
- What information is relevant to providing WIC services?
- How do you know the information is accurate?
- What important information may have been left out?

Learning activity – collecting information



Based on what you know about WIC so far, list 3 subjective and 3 objective types of information you would might need to collect if you were seeing Cheyenne, who is 5 months pregnant and enrolling in WIC.

Subjective
• 1.
• 2.
• 3.

Objective
• 1.
• 2.
• 3.

Step 2 – Clarify or gather additional details

Both objective and subjective information should be considered when deciding what action to take with a participant. You will want to compare what the participant is telling you with what you observe, to see if it matches, or if there is a logical connection.

For example, if Cheyenne from earlier, says she feels great and is eating well, but the weight you took in WIC looks like she has lost weight, you would need to dig deeper to figure out what is going on. You will need to ask additional questions to clarify information or gather more details. This is the step when you also need to check the accuracy of inconsistent or unusual measurements.

In this step, you would consider:

- Is there a difference between what the participant says and what you are observing?
- Do you need to re-check any information you gathered?
 - What factors may have influenced the accuracy of height, weight or blood work measurements (e.g. uncooperative child or faulty equipment)?
 - Should you re-check the measurement or document the problem?
- What could the participant be leaving out and how can you get that information?
- Do you need to check any of your assumptions?
- What else do I need to know? How can I find that out?

Learning activity –clarifying details



Earlier we gave an example of a pregnant woman, Cheyenne, who said she feels great and is eating well, but WIC shows a weight loss. List 3 things that you would do to clarify details or get more information from Cheyenne.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Step 3 – Analyze and evaluate the information you have

Before assigning a risk, referring a participant, or moving on to the next step in the certification, you would take a minute to consider all the information you have gathered and make sure that what you heard matches what you observed. Consider the participant’s point of view regarding their needs, concerns, and nutrition and health priorities first.

In this step, you would consider:

- What information provided by the participant is off-track or not related to the counseling session?
- What factors might contribute to the identified nutrition problem?
- What might be the relationships between the health or nutrition behaviors of the participant and what you are observing?
- Have you double-checked to make sure everything is entered into the data system and the information it is displaying is correct?

- How are you looking at this situation? Is there another point of view that should be considered?

Learning activity – analyzing the information



Here is a list of additional things that you learned from Cheyenne.

- She is a runner and did a 10K run 2 weeks ago.
 - She runs with her German Shepard, Max.
 - She says that the doctor told her she had gained 3 pounds since the beginning of her pregnancy.
1. Which of these facts could explain what you are seeing? Why?
 2. What, if anything, would you double check?

Step 4 – Determine the best course of action

Based on the subjective and objective information, your observations, your experience, and good critical thinking you will be able to draw conclusions about what is happening with the participant and can determine what is the best course of action to offer.

In this step, you would consider:

- Which nutrition concern is the highest priority to be addressed?
- What nutrition-focused counseling should be offered?
- What referrals should be made?
- What food package is the most appropriate to assign based on the participants' category, risk, and personal preferences?
- What WIC appointments should be scheduled?

Learning activity – choosing the best course of action



Using critical thinking helped you learn enough to decide the best options for Cheyenne. If a certifier hadn't taken the time to dig a little deeper, what assumptions might they have made about what was happening? How might that have changed the course of action they recommended?

Talk it over



At this point in your training you will not know everything that must be considered when counseling participants. As you complete your training, you will be more able to use the 4 steps of critical thinking and make good recommendations when counseling participants.

In this lesson we used a case study about Cheyenne to consider how the steps of critical thinking influenced counseling. Talk with your training supervisor about the case study and the role critical thinking played.