



SPEECH PATHOLOGY PATIENT: _____

SPEECH PATHOLOGIST: _____

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS: _____

DATE: _____

SESSION MATERIALS: Social Skills Alternatives to 'I Don't Know'

At times, for various reasons, the answer to questions from others is “I don’t know.”

Users of this phrase may not be aware that this short response leaves the door open for misunderstandings and could shut down conversations. Depending upon the relationship involved, it can be interpreted as on the non-descriptive side, without the person realizing it.

As a result, this prevents the answerer from going deeper into the needs of the listener, including sometimes bringing an end to opportunity for:

- Elaboration,
- Stating if willingness is present – to discuss it further (or not).
- Consideration and discussion that there may another person who could more effectively answer the question for questioner.

In essence -- unfortunately, at times, when using this phrase, it doesn’t leave any follow-up data for the listener.

In this resource, [Nice Speech Lady](#) has provided a framework to expand the options in responding more directly and descriptively.

Listed in this resource are:

- Types of different approaches to answering are described, as alternatives.
- Types of approaches are listed, with accompanying example sentences, for your reference.
- Tips to consider when learning about these alternative responses to “I don’t know.”

SLP-chosen for you, from the Nicespeechlady.com library



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SESSION MATERIALS: Social Skills Alternatives to Saying 'I Don't Know' (List of Approaches)

Instead of saying “I don’t know” to someone else’s question, you could:

Option #1. Answer the question, with the qualified “this is an educated guess,”/that you are unsure.

Option #2. Asking for more details/discussion.

Option #3: Stating you are not the person for answering, suggesting another source to be approached.

Option #4: Requesting time to respond later – due to needing more information.

Option #5: Requesting time to respond later – for any other reason.



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SESSION MATERIALS: Social Skills Alternatives to Saying 'I Don't Know' (List of Approaches + Examples)

More specific replacements to the phrase: “I don’t know” could be:

Option #1. Answer the question, with the qualified “this is an educated guess,”/that you are unsure.

- “I am not really sure. However, I could take an educated guess -- please do not quote me on this. _____.”
- “If I were to take a stab at it in the dark, I would think that _____.”
- “I am not currently aware, but you may want to consider _____.”
- “Please don’t hold me to it, as I fully don’t know. However, if I were to guess, I would say _____.”

Option #2. Asking for more details/discussion.

- “I would like to answer the question – may I please have more details first?”
- “Thanks for asking me, I would need to obtain some information from you before I answer, is that OK?”
- “What a good question. I want to answer; I need more details, could we talk about it before I answer?”

Option #3: Stating you are not the person for answering, suggesting another source to be approached.

- “I am sorry, I do not have the skill set right now to answer that. Is there someone else you could ask?”
- “You know, I wish I knew. Do you know who would be the one to answer? (then, state name/ role)”
- I unfortunately am not the one who knows that, have you asked around, you may want to try _____.”

Option #4: Requesting time to respond later – due to needing more information.

- “I need to find out more information, may I please get back to you on that?”
- “I don’t have the datapoints in order to really know right now, but could we circle back around to this later, please, I would like to help.”
- “I would like to perform some research in order to answer effectively, could we talk about this next week, please?”

Option #5: Requesting time to respond later – for any other reason.

- “I want to answer you -- I am sorry, I am tied up right now. Could you ask me later about that, please.”
- “I would really like to discuss it at a later time; could we re-visit this question next week, please?”
- “I need time to ponder on this to do it justice -- could we talk about this on another day?”
- “I am feeling overwhelmed right now – however, I do desire to answer you. Can we re-visit this later?”



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Tips in deciding how to proceed:

- If the person asking for information from you is someone you are in relationship with (a family member, a co-worker or boss, a friend, a customer, someone you communicate with and desire to continue communicating well with), using one of these alternatives to “I don’t know” may be a more beneficial approach. This is especially true if you desire to maintain an effective communicating relationship, moving forward.
- On the other hand, if the person asking for data from you is not someone you are in relationship with, such as a stranger, saying “I don’t know” may be a choice that could work.
- Placing yourself in the shoes/perspective of the questioner can be helpful. Also, considering your current situation, will aid you in knowing which approach to take other than “I don’t know.”
- Only responding with “I don’t know” is not “bad,” it just may lead the person you are in relationship to feel like you are not able to discuss it further, and it doesn’t give the person you are talking to “much to go on.”
- Not everyone knows everything, all of the time, so it isn’t necessarily “wrong” to say “I don’t know. There may even be times that “I don’t know” may be the appropriate response, based on the non-relationship/the desire to halt the conversation.
 - An example of this may be “grey rocking.” This is a term that is used on occasion by persons who have strained relationships, and the desire is to not delve much into the data. Responding to questions simply and in a short capacity keep a person “at a distance” in connection. “Grey-rock” comments are brief, vague and do not leave the door open for more conversation. A person may “grey rock” if they are estranged from a person, however the situation requires an interaction, at least in a limited capacity (one that a person may not desire). If a person answers with just “I don’t know,” it is more of a closed-door comment, and there may be times if relationships are not as you desire them to be, that this would be a helpful choice.
 - Also, in court proceedings, if a direct question is asked, lawyers representing you may advise to not proceed with guessing. In not proceeding with “what you think,” if you truly are not aware in a legal or formal situation, then just answering the question in a black or white framework may be the most effective option for your best interests. There may be occurrences where “I don’t know” or “I am not aware” is the most succinct response that may be needed, given the situation and context.
- If your objective in interacting with someone is to continue in healthy and effective relationship communication, saying “I don’t know” to their questions alone may be a challenge to the person seeking a response from you. Therefore, the above “I don’t know” alternatives provide for more specificity. Different perspectives and the listed example sentences be helpful for you to consider, depending on the interaction relationship, all things considered.



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