

Practicing Purposefully

SYSTEMIC PRACTICE

Questions

Why are they used?

There are loads of types of questions we can ask individuals and families. Questions can be used as an intervention to introduce some difference in people’s thoughts, to provide challenge in a respectful way or to find out information. Questions can ‘plant seeds of thought’: Sometimes the answers are not always important but the thoughts around the question are.

Some of the most common questions types are below. Workers should not be too concerned with what type of question they are asking, but should be aware that they are asking a variety of questions which elicit different responses. We should always be mindful of the intention behind the question we are asking too. What purpose does the question have?

Linear questions:

Gathering information questions, fact finding, which usually start with “how, what, why, when, where”
E.g. What happened? Who was there? When did this occur?

Strategic Questions:

These questions usually have an answer embedded into the question. They are corrective but leave the listener with a dilemma of whether to agree or challenge.
E.g. If you were to talk calmly instead of shouting do you think this would be better?

Circular questions:

These questions help practitioners explore relationships further. You can use these questions to *find the connections* present between people for example, similarities in thoughts, emotions or actions. You can use them to find connections over time, for example, links between past thoughts, emotions and behaviour and present thoughts, emotions or behaviours.
You can also use them to *introduce difference* to people’s experiences. So you could use them to explore different thoughts and emotions across time or between people.
E.g. What would your partner say about your child’s behaviour? How is this behaviour similar/different to last time?

Reflexive questions:

These questions relate to a person’s thoughts or feelings and the subsequent actions. There are multiple categories of reflexive questions, including hypothetical future questions. You can use them to track people’s behaviour patterns and separate out action as a result of thoughts or feelings, developing deeper self-awareness and emotional intelligence.
E.g. How do you think your child would respond if you did A instead of B?
How do you feel about that? What do you say/do when he acts that way?
You can also ask these questions from a position as an ‘observer’ and check in with people how they are in the moment, i.e. how they are feeling or what they are thinking or provide your ideas of the situation in a tentative way e.g. “I was wondering what B felt when you said that? I observed T react in this way, I wonder if they did so because they were upset, not angry?”

Scaling Questions

Scaling questions are really helpful for monitoring a person's thoughts, feelings or progression. A scale usually runs from 1-5 or 1-10. Either end of the scale is defined by the service users as to what they "look like". You can then gauge where the person is on the scale and start exploring this. The idea behind scaling questions is to find the exceptions to the problem and build upon these in a strength based way.

If doing this activity with children you can be creative about the scale and use a metaphor of a bridge, climbing a mountain, going round a race track or going up stairs as the continuum. This can then be presented in a pictorial way to increase understanding and collaboration. Instead of numbers you could use emoji faces or different colours.

E.g. Whereabouts are you on the scale today? What would one higher look like? What would one lower look like? What steps can you take to go one higher? Who would notice first that you were there? When was the last time you were a 7 not a 6? Have you ever been a 10?



Miracle Question

The miracle question is usually asked to help define goals and what small steps would need to be taken to go in the right direction for achieving the goal. It moves the person away from thinking about the past or present and gives them permission to have an imagined future free from the problem. It usually begins with asking the service user:



"Imagine in the morning you wake up and life is different. Overnight a miracle has happened and your problems/worries are gone. But when you wake up you don't know this yet. You are unaware of the miracle. What would be the first thing you would notice in the morning upon waking which would make you think that things were different, that would make you realise your problems have gone?"

Encourage the service

user to keep listing at least 3 things which would make them realise they didn't have a problem. Try asking them "what difference would that make?" as well as linking with the relationships and people around them – so who would notice, how would their relationship(s) be different? You can then link this to what they'd like to do to move towards this goal of a different life free from the 'problem'. As a follow up you should discuss how the person could start to initiate some of the smaller steps into daily life to start moving towards their goals, work out where you could be helpful to them in assisting them to reach their goals.

References

Tomm K (1987a) 'Interventive interviewing: Part 1. Strategizing as a fourth guideline for a therapist'. *Family Process* 26 13-31.

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Tomm K (1988) 'Interventive interviewing: Part 111. Intending to ask lineal, circular strategic and reflexive questions'. *Family Process* 27 1-15.