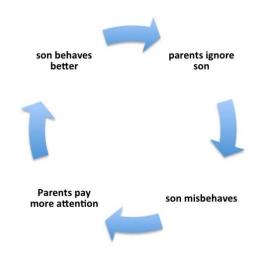## What is it?

Circularities arose from early systemic ideas about individuals in family systems all impacting each other (the 'vibrations' which are felt continuously from and between each person). Every behaviour is a communication – someone can never *not* communicate to others around them. See opposite for a basic example of this.

Therefore, individuals do not operate in insolation, they are always impacted by everyone around them – on a behavioural level, or beliefs, values, thoughts, feelings etc.

Behaviour is not a *linear* process as it is usually hard to find the start or end of a particular incident/interaction. Even the start of an argument could have elements from a previous argument/mood/incident embedded into it. Circularities also give rise to patterns which can be asked about and tracked and hopefully challenged and changed.

Circular questions developed from the ideas of 'circularities' (from the Milan approach). They used these types of questions to support their enquiries and exploration of both helpful and unhelpful interactions within the family system. The use of these questions allowed families to see themselves Systemically (i.e. connected) as oppose to individuals.

There are many types of circular questions and the variety of questions one can ask is endless. However, helpfully Fleuridas *et al* (1986) has split them into the 4 categories described below:

1. **Problem definition**
   What is each person's perceptions of the problem? Ask for their explanation of the situation – *What is the problem? Why do they think the problem exists? Who noticed it first?*

2. **Sequence of interaction**
   Ask each person 'who does what' in relation to the problem/symptom.
   Use language focused on 'to show' e.g. not *'when is he angry?'* but *'when does he **show** anger?'* This allows space for the person to be something other than the behaviour or emotion. Make sure people elaborate on the descriptions they give i.e. *what does he **DO** which shows you he is angry?* This really breaks down their thought patterns and interpretations of others' behaviour which will increase self-awareness in themselves. Explore the differences or changes over time (in the past, future & hypothetical events) e.g. *"If you were to do something else instead of the X behaviour…?"*); Is everyone's perception about the behaviour different? What impacts this difference? i.e. how do their values, beliefs and rules about 'how things should be' impact on how things actually 'are'.

3. **Comparison/classification (connections)**
   Compare or group together each person's beliefs, values, and feelings. What are their relationships like? Their behaviours? Their habits? Are there differences/similarities over generations? Are there any alliances? What patterns can you see? How have these changed over time? (Past and future).

This category can be broken down further in regard to **finding differences & connections**, as follows:

Across time…

Explore difference to create the idea that things are not static in life. Highlight changes that have occurred even if the other person hasn't noticed these before. Looking at when problems have been better or worse allows examination of the detail around these times which can be helpful to identify difference in behaviours, thoughts or feelings.
Future oriented questions help the person to think about new possibilities and creates hope. Help the person reflect on how connections between past and present events impact their present thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Between people…

Explore differences in behaviours, individual's attitudes, beliefs and values. This could create agreement amongst family members and develop increased solidarity. You could use scaling/rating questions to highlight differences or connections in how people view others/problems in the family.

Between different contexts…

All behaviour should be seen in the context to which it occurred. Use questions to explore differences in behaviour, feelings or thoughts depending on the context to which it was displayed or felt. Connection can then be made with these different contexts. Questions on a feelings level develop deeper understanding about why we act as we do. It increases a person's self-awareness and increases empathy for others.

When does the person act differently and how? What factors are present? How does it relate to their beliefs and values?

Try and avoid the common question of 'how did that make you feel?' as it implies that someone/something else had control over the person's emotional response.
"What feelings come up for you…"

Between person & problem…

Problems are not present 100% of the time, so try and explore the opposing emotions e.g. anger/calm to bring about difference in thoughts. Try and reframe the problem i.e. connect anger becomes frustration or a form of passion related to positive convictions about something (e.g. the 'right way' to go about something)

4. **Interventive questioning**
   The intent of these questions is to
   challenge, inform, reframe, embed indirect suggestions of alternative possibilities etc.
   They are your intervention. Use them alongside statements. Start with the least offensive/threatening questions to test the responses from the family members – stay in their comfort zone depending on their ways of functioning and language they use.
   E.g. "Have you had some special time alone with your dad lately? What did you do?"; "In what other ways does he show you that he's concerned about the two of you?"
   "Do you think she would be more willing to share her feelings if you were to…"

   Always try and remain neutral to their responses and non-judgemental in follow up questions, use curious language such as "*what would happen if…?" or "I'm curious about…"* Look out for any agreements/disagreements between family members. "*Who most thinks this/that?"* and *"When did the family start to think that?"*

Helpful articles
Fleuridas, C., Nelson, T., & Rosenthal, D. (1986). The Evolution of circular questions: Training Family therapists. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 12 (2) pp113-127

Brown, J. (1997) Circular Questioning: An introductory Guide. In A.N.Z.J Family Therapy 18 (2) pp109-114