

SOLUTION-FOCUSED INTERVIEWING SKILLS & QUESTIONS

- **Open-ended Questions:** “Can you tell me about your relationship with your parents vs. “Do you like your parents?” (Forced choice requiring yes or no response). “Tell me about your parenting experience. “Who are your supports and how do they help you?”
Note: identify and reflect to clients any strengths or positive qualities clients may reveal in their responses to the open-ended questions.
- **Summarizing:** Periodically state back to the client his/her thoughts, actions, and feelings.
- **Tolerating/Using Silence:** Allow 10, 15, 20 seconds or so to allow clients to come up with their own responses. Avoid temptation to fill in silence with advice.
- **Self-disclosure:** Not recommended. Better to look for solutions within the client’s frame of reference.
- **Complimenting:** Acknowledging client strengths and past success.
- **Affirming Client’s Perceptions:** A perception is some aspect of a person’s self-awareness or awareness of his/her life. They include a person’s thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and experiences. Affirmation of client’s perceptions is similar to reflective listening in form, but does not isolate and focus on the feeling component per se, but on the client’s larger awareness. (Examples; “uh-huh”, “sure”, “of course”, or “I can understand why you want to have a place of your own, away from your family”).
- **Working with Client’s Negative or Inaccurate Perceptions:** Perceptions, even negative ones like suicide or assaultive behaviors should be explored for the purpose of understanding the full context. “What’s happening in your life that tells you that hitting or suicide might be helpful in this situation?”
 - Some perceptions may be obviously inaccurate and reflect a person’s denial of a problem; example “I don’t have a drinking problem,” despite several DUI citations. Or, “I don’t have an anger problem,” despite arrests for assault or disorderly conduct. Indirect or Relationship questions can be useful in working with the distorted perception. “If your spouse (children, probation officer, family member, etc.) were here, what might she or he say about your drinking or how you express your anger?”

Avoid an immediate educative or dissuading response to negative or inaccurate perceptions. Listening and understanding are the practitioner’s first obligations.
- **Returning the Focus to the Client:** Clients tend to focus on the problem and/or what they would like others to do differently. In the Solution-Focused approach, the client is encouraged to return the focus to themselves and to possible solutions:
Examples include the following:

1. “My kids are lazy. They don’t realize that I need help sometimes.”
“*What gives you hope that this problem can be solved?*”
 2. “I wish my parents would get with it. A 10:00 pm curfew on weekends is ridiculous.”
“*When things are going better, what will your parents notice you doing differently?*”
 3. “My teachers are too hard. If they would back off all the homework and give more help my grades would improve.”
“*What is it going to take to make things even a little bit better?*”
 4. “If my boss would stop criticizing me and treating me like a child I could be more productive.”
“*If your boss was here and I was to ask him what you could do differently to make it just a little easier for him not to be so critical, what do you think he would say?*”
- **Amplifying Solution Talk (Difference Questions):** Solution talk addresses what aspects of life the client wants to be different and the possibilities for making those things happen. The task of the practitioner is to encourage the client to provide as much detail as possible to amplify what will be different in his life after his problem is solved.

EXCEPTION QUESTIONS

Exceptions are those occasions in clients’ lives when their problems could have occurred but did not – or at least were less severe. Exception questions focus on who, what, when and where (the conditions that helped the exception to occur) - **NOT WHY**; should be related to client goals.

- Are there times when the problem does not happen or is less serious? When? How does this happen?
- Have there been times in the last couple of weeks when the problem did not happen or was less severe?
- How was it that you were able to make this exception happen?
- What was different about that day?
- If your friend (teacher, relative, spouse, partner, etc.) were here and I were to ask him what he noticed you doing different on that day, what would he say? What else?

COPING QUESTIONS

Coping questions attempt to help the client shift his/her focus away from the problem elements and toward what the client is doing to survive the painful or stressful circumstances. They are related in a way to exploring for exceptions.

- What have you found that is helpful in managing this situation?
- Considering how depressed and overwhelmed you feel how is it that you were able to get out of bed this morning and make it to our appointment (or make it to work)?
- You say that you’re not sure that you want to continue working on your goals. What is it that has helped you to work on them up to now?

SCALING QUESTIONS

Scaling questions invite the clients to put their observations, impressions, and predictions on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being no chance, and 10 being every chance. Questions need to be specific, citing specific times and circumstances.

- On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being not serious at all and 10 being the most serious, how serious do you think the problem is now?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, what number would it take for you to consider the problem to be sufficiently solved?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being no confidence and 10 being very confident, how confident are you that this problem can be solved?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being no chance and 10 being every chance, how likely is it that you will be able to say “No” to your boyfriend when he offers you drugs?
- What would it take for you to increase, by just one point, your likelihood of saying “No”?
- What’s the most important thing you have to do to keep things at a 7 or 8.

INDIRECT (RELATIONSHIP) QUESTIONS

Indirect questions invite the client to consider how others might feel or respond to some aspect of the client’s life, behavior or future changes. Indirect questions can be useful in asking the client to reflect on narrow or faulty perceptions without the worker directly challenging those perceptions or behaviors.

Examples:

“How is it that someone might think that you are neglecting or mistreating your children?”

“Has anyone ever told you that they think you have a drinking problem?”

“If your children were here (and could talk, if the children are infants or toddlers) what might they say about how they feel when you and your wife have one of those serious arguments?”

“At the upcoming court hearing, what changes do you think the judge will expect from you in order to consider returning your children?”

“How do you think your children (spouse, relative, caseworker, employer) will react when you make the changes we talked about?”

THE MIRACLE QUESTION

The “Miracle Question” is the opening piece of the process of developing well-formed goals. It gives clients permission to think about an unlimited range of possibilities for change. It begins to move the focus away from their current and past problems and toward a more satisfying life.

“Now, I want to ask you a different kind of question. I want you to imagine a time in the future when the problem which brought you to the attention of CYS is solved. All the present barriers are gone. So, when this miracle happens what will be different that will tell you that this positive future has happened and the problem is solved?”

(Adapted from de Shazer, 1988)

Alternate Phrasing of the Miracle Question

“Now, I want to ask you a question. I want you to imagine a time in the future when the problem which brought you to the attention of CYS is solved. All the present barriers are gone. So, when this happens what will be different that will tell you that this positive future has happened and the problem is solved?”

(adapted from de Shazer, 1988)

FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

Through follow-up questions, the interviewer further extends and amplifies the impact of the miracle by a series of questions designed to guide the client in exploring the implications of the miracle in the client’s life.

Examples:

“What will be the first thing you notice that would tell you that a miracle has happened, that things are different?”

“What might others (mother, father, spouse, partner, siblings, friends, work associates, teachers, etc) notice about you that would tell them that the miracle has happened, that things are different or better?”

“Have there been times when you have seen pieces of this miracle happen?”

“What’s the first step that you can take to begin to make this miracle happen?”

“When you wake up next Monday, Wednesday and Friday I would like you to imagine that the miracle has happened. Then try to respond by letting your feelings and behavior reflect that the miracle has happened.”