Asking Questions

Introduction

When listening to another person’s difficulties, we might find ourselves asking a lot of questions. We usually mean well. In part, we do this to find out more so a solution can be quickly devised. We also do this as a way of filling in the gaps when our reflective listening skills are not strong. It may be easier for the listener to say “Did you have any money?” or “Where did the man say he lived?” than to simply say, “Tell me about what happened.”

Sometimes when we listen, we feel nervous about what the other person expects from us. After all, if we are the worker, should we not have all the answers? If we do not have an answer just yet, we can stall for time by asking a lot of questions until we do.

Often, however, the client hears these questions as prying. You may ask questions at a rate the client is not ready to answer. For instance, you may be asking questions further ahead in the story, throwing the client off. Clients may feel pushed to reveal more than they intended or be distracted from the line of reasoning they were following. They may become defensive and their communication guarded if the questions seem to pry or to imply there is only one way to have handled things.
When Questions Are Important

Obviously, at times questions need to be asked. The three times it is important to ask questions are as follows:

1. When you are opening a case or chart on a person and need identifying information (closed questions)
2. When you are compiling information for assessment and referral purposes and need facts to do that properly (closed questions)
3. When you are encouraging the client to talk about his or her situation freely to better understand which aspects of it are important to the client (open questions)

Closed Questions

A closed question is one that requires a single answer. For example:

**WORKER:** Where do you live?
**CLIENT:** 346 Pine Street.
**WORKER:** How long have you lived there?
**CLIENT:** Oh, about 6 years.
**WORKER:** Have you ever been seen here before?
**CLIENT:** Yes, in 2009.
**WORKER:** And who did you see then?
**CLIENT:** Dr. Langley in outpatient.
**WORKER:** Did she prescribe any medication?
**CLIENT:** Yes, she gave me a prescription for Prozac.
**WORKER:** Do you still take that?
**CLIENT:** No, I stopped a few months ago.

Closed questions are most often used when opening a case or when compiling information for an assessment. In both of these instances, however, clients will need to talk about what has brought them into the service, and you will not rely exclusively on closed questions. Nevertheless, some closed questions are appropriate here to gather the basic information. The client can respond with a simple answer because the questions do not ask for expressions of feelings, descriptions of circumstances, or explanations of problems.

Remember too, as noted in Chapter 7, asking one closed question after another about a person’s situation or problem can sound as if the case manager is frantically trying to find a solution, rather than trying to understand what concerns the client.
Open Questions

Open questions serve the purpose of giving clients more opportunity to talk about what is important to them. By asking open questions, you receive more information about a client’s situation. In answering open questions, the client can talk about feelings, underlying causes, supporting circumstances, and personal plans.

Open questions have been shown to put clients at ease. Workers using these questions are not perceived as prying but as expressing real interest in other people or a genuine desire to understand their situation. You can use open questions to obtain examples or elaboration of the problem and to clarify certain aspects of the other person’s story.

Often an open question begins with “can” or “could,” but there are other ways to start such questions. For example, you might say, “Tell me a little bit more about your divorce.” Typically open questions look something like this:

**WORKER:** Can you tell me about the night your father left?

**CLIENT:** Well, my mother had been arguing with him for some time. I could tell he was getting angry. I don’t think I really blame her for his leaving. He had done many things to her that she had every right to be angry about. But I guess for him it was the last straw. Anyway, we were having dinner and she began on the same topic of the house. He just put down his fork and got up from the table and walked out of the house.

**WORKER:** Can you describe your relationship with him after that?

**CLIENT:** Well, he did come back to the house for his things from time to time. He got an apartment nearby, and I used to stop there on my way home from school. We never stopped seeing each other, and we never talked about my mother. I can’t ever remember him asking me how she was or, for that matter, saying anything mean about her.

Would the worker have gained as much information by conducting the same conversation using closed questions? This example demonstrates that the client would have been much less forthcoming:

**WORKER:** When did your father leave?

**CLIENT:** Oh, August of 2004.

**WORKER:** Did your parents argue much before he left?

**CLIENT:** Sure, yeah, a lot of the time.

**WORKER:** Why did he go?

**CLIENT:** Well, they disagreed over money.

**WORKER:** After he left, where did he go?

**CLIENT:** He got an apartment near us.

**WORKER:** Did you ever see him after that?

**CLIENT:** Yes, pretty much.
Would the client have felt investigated with these short closed questions fired at him, one after the other? Did the worker really understand how the client felt about the divorce and the contact with his father?

In the second example, in which the worker used closed questions, there was room for the worker to assume things that might not be true. For instance, the worker might have assumed that the client blamed his father for leaving. In the first example, in which the worker used open questions, the client's elaboration on the situation demonstrated that this clearly was not the case.

You can see Keyanna use open questions to learn more about Michelle's situation by watching "The First Interview" on the DVD that comes with your textbook. Danica uses open questions to work with Alison on her service plan in "Developing a Service Plan" and "Helping Tom Solve Personal Problem."

## Questions That Make the Client Feel Uncomfortable

### Avoid the Use of "Why" Questions

If you ask someone why they did something or did not do something, you imply that you believe the person should have handled things differently.

- "Why didn't you call the police?"
- "Why did you go there?"
- "Why were your children out that late?"

### Do Not Ask Multiple Questions

If you fire off a string of questions, the person can feel interrogated. You may sound impatient, and you can confuse the client.

"Did you see the other person? What did he look like? Did you get a license plate number or some identifying information? How close were you? Did anyone else have information that would identify him? Did the police have any suggestions?"

As we saw in Chapter 7, too many closed questions can sound as if you are desperately trying to solve the problem for the client. In the example above the worker is getting bits and pieces of information, but probably would have done better to simply have asked, "Tell me about what happened that night?"

### Do Not Change the Subject

If the client is talking about how she learned of her mother's death, do not start asking questions about her mother's prearranged funeral. Let the client continue to talk about her mother's death until it seems that she wants to turn to the prearranged funeral. Never ask about something out of curiosity. Do not ask, for example, about the
prearranged funeral because you are thinking of getting one for your mother and want to know more about it. Ask questions that stay on the topic the client has selected. If you do ask questions on another topic, make sure the topic is relevant and the questions will actually clarify the client's situation for you.

Here are some examples of questions that change the subject:

- "I heard about the kids before, but where do you work?"
- "So, she died on Saturday, and now you are seeing a lawyer about the will?"
- "That's real neat about how your car looked before the accident. Do you have adequate car insurance?"
- "So, your mother died on Saturday, and you're living in a house by yourself?"

Sometimes questions such as these can disrupt the entire discussion.

Do Not Imply There Is Only One Answer to Your Question

You can ask questions in a way that implies there is only one acceptable answer.

- "Didn't you go to the police?"
- "Did you tell the other person what you heard?"
- "Did you see to it that he knew what you were thinking?"

Do Not Inflict Your Values on the Client

You can also ask questions based on your own value system. The client, however, may have other values. For example, you may value truthfulness at all costs, whereas your client may come from a group that values group harmony and not hurting another person's feelings. Questions that imply that your value system is better are not useful.

- "Did you tell her how you felt before you just walked out?"
- "Did you tell her the complete truth?"
- "Don't you value truth above everything else in this situation?"

Do Not Ask Questions That Make Assumptions

You can word questions in such a way that they make it clear you are assuming you already know the answers.

- "You called the police, right?"
- "You wanted to go to the store, didn't you?"
- "He was being a fool, wasn't he?"

A Formula for Asking Open Questions

Figure 9.1 contains a formula for asking open questions. In the figure, the open question is broken into parts. You can interexchange the parts, by choosing one part from each column, to construct good open questions that encourage the other person to
FIGURE 9.1  Formula for asking open questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Openers</th>
<th>Directives</th>
<th>Add-ons/Softeners</th>
<th>Object of the Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can you</td>
<td>share</td>
<td>a little bit more about</td>
<td>your husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>describe</td>
<td>a little bit about</td>
<td>your childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>explain</td>
<td>a little more about</td>
<td>your medication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>summarize</td>
<td>something about</td>
<td>what the move was like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>outline</td>
<td>the problems with</td>
<td>the move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>spell out</td>
<td>the larger picture</td>
<td>regarding the move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could you</td>
<td>talk</td>
<td>a little more about</td>
<td>what your dad said</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>give me</td>
<td>a bit more about</td>
<td>your illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tell me</td>
<td>something more about</td>
<td>your job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>help me</td>
<td>something about</td>
<td>your relationship with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>understand</td>
<td>a bit</td>
<td>your kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>clarify</td>
<td></td>
<td>the situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"It is fine to leave the "can you" or "could you" out of the questions. In this case, you would make a request such as "Share a little bit more about the fire."

feel safe in talking and expressing feelings and opinions. Use this formula in the exercises at the end of this chapter to construct effective open questions that invite others to be open and talk freely with you.

**Some Tips for Asking Open Questions**

Learning to ask open questions takes practice. It is easy to ask a closed question, such as "Where do you live?" or "How old are you?" When intending to ask an open question, we often start out well and then unwittingly close the question. Some examples of what can happen are presented next.

**A Question That Is Not Really Open**

"Tell me a little bit about how you got here?" "How you got here" is a closed question and the client can answer, "I came over in the car."

**To Open That Question Try This**

"Tell me about getting here." The client is more inclined to say more, such as "Well, I came over in the car, but it was scary. I kept looking in my rearview mirror to see if he was following me."

**Words That Snap Questions Closed Are How, Why, What, When, Where**

You may not be able to avoid using these words in some of your open questions, and using these words in questions is perfectly all right. To leave them out might
mean your question doesn’t make sense. However, when our purpose is to draw clients out and make them feel comfortable about talking to us in depth, we want our questions to be as open as possible. When you are about to use one of these words—how, why, what, when, or where—see if you can leave it out for a more open question.

**INSTEAD OF:** “Tell me a bit about how you found out about your husband’s cheating.”

**ASK:** “Tell me about finding out about your husband.”

**INSTEAD OF:** “Can you describe why you left him?”

**ASK:** “Can you describe leaving him?”

**INSTEAD OF:** “Could you tell me a little bit about what the doctor said?”

**ASK:** “Could you tell me a little bit about visiting the doctor?”

**INSTEAD OF:** “Can you summarize for me when you left?”

**ASK:** “Can you tell me about leaving?”

**INSTEAD OF:** “Tell me a bit more about where you were that night.”

**ASK:** “Tell me a bit more about that night.”

If we look at one of those pairs of questions carefully, we can see that the two questions are asking for somewhat different information. For example, in responding to the question “Tell me a bit more about where you were that night,” the client might tell you where she was and in addition give you more valuable information beyond that: “I was down by the railroad tracks. I thought I could hop a freight or something like that. I just wanted to get away.” When you say “Tell me about that night,” you are asking him for much more, and he may be inclined to tell you many more details: “I was feeling terrified. I didn’t know who these people were or why they had singled me out. I didn’t know what to do or where to go so I went down by the railroad tracks. I thought I could jump a freight or something like that. I just wanted to get away. I saw it starting to get light. No one came, and finally I got up and snuck home.” In this last example we know a lot more about the night in question, and we have some idea about the client’s perceptions and feelings as well.

**Summary**

Asking questions helps us to understand our clients and the issues that are bothering them. Asking too many questions, however, can give the impression that we are desperately seeking some sort of solution. Keep in mind what you learned about who owns the problem. The problems clients bring to us are theirs. They need someone to listen to their concerns and sort out the best way to approach a solution. We help clients do that by listening and asking open questions that encourage them to tell us more about what has brought them to us for help.
Combine open questions with active listening to feelings and content in order to create a safe environment for clients to talk to you and begin to work on problem solving. Ask closed questions sparingly, but remember that an occasional closed question is perfectly acceptable; confine them to times such as when you are opening a case or you need information to make a proper referral.

**Exercises I: What Is Wrong with These Questions?**

**Instructions:** Read the questions that follow and decide what makes them bad questions. In writing your criticism, look for questions that assume there is only one answer, inflict values on the client, make the client defensive, make assumptions, cut off discussion, or change the subject.

1. A woman is telling a worker why she has come to the shelter tonight. Right in the middle of her gripping tale about what was going on at home only a few hours before, the worker says, “How long has this been going on?”

2. A worker has listened to a young mother talk about how she dropped out of school and got pregnant and has no skills. Finally the worker interrupts to ask, “Did you have to get pregnant? Didn’t you know about birth control?”

3. A man calls and says he is depressed. He has felt depressed for some time and is now thinking of suicide. The worker asks, “Where is your wife? Are you divorced?”

4. A man is telling you about the night he witnessed a murder. The victim was his brother-in-law, and although he was not very close to him, he feels that maybe he could have stopped his death in some way. The worker asks, “Why don’t you just go and ask the police?”

176  Section 3  Effective Communication
5. A woman has come into temporary shelter with a lot of debts. She has been out looking for work today and is discouraged about not finding anything yet. She sits down tiredly in the worker’s office and talks about what her day was like. The worker asks, “Did you have to get so many debts?”

6. A man wants to know if his wife is all right after she has been raped. He is sitting with a worker in the waiting room while his wife is being seen in the emergency room. The worker answers his question with one of her own: “How much does your wife mean to you?”

7. A patient in a partial hospitalization program for the chronically mentally ill tells the worker that when the group went to the mall, one of the patients took a pair of socks without paying for them. The worker asks, “You told someone right away, didn’t you?”

8. A woman is telling about the time her coworkers waste when the supervisors are out at meetings all day. The worker responds, “Why don’t you say something?”

9. A woman tells a worker about a long and difficult marriage she has endured. She mentions abuse, both verbal and physical, and talks about her own failing health in recent months. The worker asks, “Why can’t you just bring yourself to divorce him?”
10. A man is trying to sort out whether or not to leave his employer. He feels that the small company is poorly run and that he could do a better job if he went out on his own. On the other hand, he likes his employer, and he feels sorry for him and the mess he’s made of his business. He knows that if he leaves, things will really fall apart. The worker asks, “Don’t you value loyalty?”

Exercise II: Which Question Is Better?

Instructions: Read the following questions and decide which of them are better than others. Place a check mark next to those you think are good questions, and then explain why you think they are better than the ones you did not check.

☐ 1. The worker to a woman in the hospital waiting room whose baby just died of pneumonia: “How old was your baby?”

☐ 2. The worker to a woman who is grieving after her husband died in a hunting accident: “Could you tell me about your husband?”

☐ 3. The worker to a teenage boy who is afraid of failing a math course and losing an opportunity to get a scholarship: “Can you tell me a little bit about this math course?”

☐ 4. The worker to a young woman who has just discovered her best friend and her boyfriend have been seeing each other behind her back: “Can you tell me something about your best friend?”

☐ 5. The worker to an elderly woman whose dog of 15 years has died: “Couldn’t you get another one?”

☐ 6. The worker to a man who is requesting food for his family after running out of unemployment compensation and being unable to find a job: “Can you describe the sort of work you would be looking for?”

☐ 7. The worker to a woman in a shelter who has been out searching unsuccessfully for a house or apartment for herself and her two children: “Where all did you look?”

☐ 8. The worker to a single mother who has been referred for parenting skills training: “Could you tell me something about the problems you have been having with Johnnie?”

☐ 9. The worker to a man with developmental disabilities whose mother, with whom he has always lived, died unexpectedly: “What did your mother die of?”

☐ 10. The worker to a woman who was accosted and assaulted in her neighborhood and is afraid of calling the police: “Can you tell me a little bit about what happened tonight?”
Exercises III: Opening Closed Questions

Opening Closed Questions 1

Instructions: Following are some vignettes in which the worker asks closed questions. Write an open question you think might work better in each situation, and be prepared to tell why you think the closed question is not useful.

1. A human service worker in the emergency room is talking to a man who was hit on the head before he was robbed. He seems to be having trouble getting the story out, but he wants to tell the worker everything that happened. The worker has been with the man a long time. She thinks that it is late and that the man ought to get to bed and rest now. The worker cuts off the discussion with, "Aren't you tired, Mr. Jones?" What open question would you have asked Mr. Jones to help him wrap up his story?

2. The human service worker is trying to learn what happened that resulted in Mrs. Peters being without housing. Mrs. Peters says she has been "on the street a while now." The worker asks, "Have you been on the street for 2 years, 3 years?" What open question would you have asked to learn more about what happened to Mrs. Peters to make her homeless?

3. The human service worker is on the phone with a woman, the victim of child abuse. The woman tells how she has felt recently, how she needed to call, and then sighs and says, "Oh, I don't know how to begin." The worker asks, "Did your father do this to you?" What open question would you have asked to help the woman start telling the story in her own way?

4. An older man has just lost his job after repeated warnings to come to work sober and seek help for his alcohol addiction. He has decided that he should get help now. "Too little, too late," he says with resignation. "I should have been here 6 months ago." The worker asks, "Why did you ever let it get to this?"
5. A child is talking to a youth worker while he waits for his mother to get a place to stay. “We’ve lived in 16 places,” he announces, “and I’m only 7.” The worker says, “What school did you go to last?” What open question would you have asked to help the child talk about what all this moving has been like for him?

6. A man calls a hot line and tells the mental health worker he wants to die. The volunteer asks, “Does this have to do with being abused as a child?” The man is startled and says, “Why, uh, no. Not really.” The worker asks, “Well, what’s the problem?” What open question would you have asked to help the man talk about what was troubling him?

Opening Closed Questions II

Instructions: Put yourself in the place of the worker in the following vignettes, and decide what question you would ask in each situation. Write an open question that you think might work better than the one asked by the worker, and be prepared to tell why you think the closed question is not useful.

1. A worker is interviewing a man in the food bank. He tells the worker that he and his children have not eaten for 24 hours and that he has spent most of that time getting referred around town until he finally get a voucher to come to you for food. The worker asks, “Why don’t you have any food?” What would you ask?

2. A woman is referred to the social service department in a large hospital after having a stroke. She is somewhat incapacitated and has had a lot of therapy while hospitalized. Now she is going home and needs therapy at home. The worker asks, “What kind of therapy do you want?” What would you ask?

3. A 16-year-old girl was brought in by her parents after they caught her and some of her friends huffing glue and gasoline. The girl is reluctant to talk and seems a little petulant about being brought in. The worker asks, “Huffing glue. So tell me, you did it to get high, to be one of the crowd, to be smart? What would you ask?”
4. A man and woman have been referred by the county Children and Youth Services for parenting skills training. They are poor and have had their four children removed from the home. They have been told the children will be returned when they complete the course and demonstrate they can use the skills they learned in supervised visitations. The worker asks, “Are your children good kids?” What would you ask?

5. An elderly woman has been having trouble caring for herself in her own home. Twice now, in the middle of the night, she has called an ambulance and has been taken to the hospital for chest pains. When her heart is checked, she is found to be in good health, if a little frail. The worker who is looking into what could be going on asks, “Are you afraid to stay at home alone?” What would you ask?

6. A young woman and her baby have been given a voucher for temporary shelter after she lost the apartment in which she was living. She was evicted for back rent, and her rent fell into arrears only when she was laid off several months ago. She has worked, but she cannot earn quite what she was making before. The worker doing the intake interview asks, “What kind of work have you been doing?” What would you ask?

Exercises IV: Try Asking Questions

Instructions: Look at the case histories that follow and, for each one, write four closed questions and four open questions that you might ask the client.

1. Annette came to your office needing her prescription filled. She was in Marywood Hospital, a private mental hospital, and was discharged on Tuesday. She was given prescriptions, but has no money to fill them. She has no job and probably is eligible for prescriptions paid for by the county. You open a case on her.

Your Closed Questions to Open her Case are:

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
Your Open Questions to Learn More About her are:

1.
2.
3.
4.

2. Marie was a client of a partial hospitalization program. She was loud and demanding, but she often felt hurt upon learning that others were afraid of her or reacted to her as if she were angry. As a result of an encounter in the partial program, she is sent to you, her new case manager, to see if there are ways to help her that might work better. You need to understand more clearly what has happened from her perspective and what sort of program she might fit into.

Your Closed Questions to Become Acquainted with her Case are:

1.
2.
3.
4.

Your Open Questions to Learn More About her Problems and Desires for Treatment are:

1.
2.
3.
4.