



APPROPRIATE QUESTIONING

The Importance of Appropriateness

In the term ‘appropriate questioning’, the word ‘appropriate’ is really important. That’s because so often, questions are inappropriate – and this can derail the [empathy](#) within the counselling relationship. Appropriate questioning, meanwhile, can deepen relational depth with the client.

The use of questions is usually covered quite early on in counselling training – I do so with my Level 2 learners (in the introduction to counselling, Counselling Concepts). As well as introducing the theory that I cover in this blog post, I warn them that questioning is to be used only when 100% necessary. And very often, questions are not necessary.

Questioning in Person-Centred Counselling

I am working from a person-centred base here. So it may well be that, in other modalities, questions that delve into, explore and expand on elements of the narrative that the client is bringing are encouraged and are appropriate. But in the person-centred approach, we believe that the client is the expert; this is what [Carl Rogers](#) told us. It’s not for us to guide the client. It’s for the client to guide us, and for us to walk with them in their subjective reality. That is the empathic bond that we have with the client.

If we ask a question, it is for our knowledge – for us to better understand what the client is bringing. We must be really careful that our questions don’t set the agenda – that we are allowing the client to do this, even when (and this can be difficult) we can see that the meat of what the client needs to work on is in a different direction. We might feel we can see it: it’s there, it’s massive, and the client is so close to it – they just need a tiny nudge and then they’ll see it. So if we ask the right question, the client is suddenly going to see this massive mound of opportunity

for them to grow. But this is not our journey; it's the client's journey. It's for them to find the mound of opportunity, and it may well not be the same one that we see.

Cognition or Emotion?

Also, questions are cognitive; in other words, you answer a question not from your emotional core but from looking around in your head. You cognitively search for the answer, you find it, and then you bring that information out to the person who has asked the question. But within counselling, we're looking to touch on emotion. We're looking to submerge ourselves in the emotion – the pain, the distress, the discomfort. We recognize that it's a difficult journey for the client, and we're there with them (no matter how scary that may be) so they don't have to go alone. If we ask a question, we take the client straight out of that emotional bath of richness and put them right into their head, where they cognitively search for the answer. It's like there's a disconnect from the emotion when we answer a question.

You can hear this in action by listening to recorded skill sessions. Listen to where the client is before you ask the question, and the kind of words they're using. And then look at where they are afterwards: has it dragged the client away from the feeling? Very often, it has.

Rogers' View of Questioning

Rogers reckons that we don't need to ask questions, other than to clarify our understanding. I think this is pure genius; my admiration for Rogers increases the more I study his work. If we are to have that empathic bond – and **empathy** means being there within the client's frame of reference – then we need to know that we've got that frame of reference correct. And if we're not sure, we need to clarify. The way we do that is to ask a question.

When we ask a question in that situation, we're not bringing in our agenda in; we're just trying hard to be in the frame of reference of the client, and so we reflect their words within the question. Here's an example of where a question is used to clarify:

Client: It feels – when it is for my own gain, want or pleasing – I guess, it really feels selfish.

Counsellor: I wonder if I can check with you, just so that I can fully understand the word 'selfish' as you see it and feel it. What does 'selfish' mean to you?

Client: My interpretation of it is very much for self-gain and self-pleasure, I guess – wanting my own way, and in a context, where, maybe in a family situation, choices arise and all that. If I was to push my own wishes or my wants, it just feels so closed off, not being able to incorporate all. Going through this, I guess the expression of what I would want and need doesn't ultimately mean that that is what's going to end up happening.

However, I feel that, if I was to express my own wants and needs, I would somehow be insisting that it follows what I want and need. And that's not always, I guess, true in every situation. Maybe, sometimes, and then maybe not. But the fear, I guess, is that someone else not having their want and need mentioned or met in exchange for mine, it feels like an unfair trade. I don't know. I would rather

it be someone else's wishes, and I'd go along with theirs. And I don't know where that comes from.

When the client answers my question, she's initially moved from being in an emotional to in a cognitive place. But then the question – used for clarification – actually deepens where the client goes, and she starts using a lot more feeling words. Because the question is about keeping in her frame of reference, it doesn't take very long before she uses the words 'I feel' again, and she deeply explores the word 'selfish'.

Open versus Closed Questions

There are **two types of questions** in counselling. Closed questions have a 'yes' or 'no' answer; these should be avoided, as they kind-of stop everything dead. Instead, we need to use open questions; these ask the client to elaborate on or clarify something. For example, the client could not answer just 'yes' or 'no' to the question in the dialogue above; it requires her to clarify – to delve deeper.

Alternatives to Questions

What else can we use when we're not sure what exactly a client means? For example, if a client was speaking about his brother and father, he might say: 'I really struggle with my brother and my father. They don't get on, and at times he makes me so angry.' Who does the client mean by 'he': the brother or the father? Not knowing who makes him angry means I cannot be fully within the client's frame of reference.

I could ask: 'Sorry, just so I can understand, who is it that you're angry at – your father or your brother?' This risks ripping the client out of that emotion (the anger). Instead, we could use **reflection**: 'He makes you so angry.' This invites the client to expand on what he has said. He might say: 'Yes, ever since I was a young boy, my dad was always ...' In this case, I didn't need to ask a question – we're still in the feelings, and I've got what I needed in order to be fully in the client's frame of reference.

Of course, the client might not reveal the information I need in his answer – for example, if he responded to my reflection: 'He does. He makes me really angry – in fact, so angry that I don't know what to do about it anymore.' In that case, I would still need to put in a question: 'Is this your dad or your brother that you're referring to?'

How about You?

So this has been just a short guide to **questioning**. I hope that what comes through loud and clear here is that I use questioning very sparingly. But this is not about me; it's about you, and it's about your practice. Examine the questions that you ask within your therapy, and how your clients respond. To do this, I highly recommend recording your **sessions** (with the client's permission), listening back, and seeing what effect questions are having. Are they working for you? When they do work, why? If they didn't work, why not? Use what you find to refine to what extent – and how – you ask questions.