

Using Questions in Counseling

Questions are an important micro-skill in counseling and are frequently used as an informal assessment and to encourage a client to move “deeper” into a narrative or experience. When talking about questions we can categorize them into two primary categories: open and closed. Open questions encourage the respondent to elaborate more while closed questions limit the respondent’s response. Closed questions are generally answered with either “yes” or “no” or another dichotomous or multiple choice answer. While closed questions have a place in the counseling room, overreliance on them can result in the counselor feeling stuck or as though the session has stagnated.

Examples of open question stems:

What...

When...

Where...

How...

Tell... The stem “tell” generally produces a statement rather than a question. For example, “Tell me more about your relationship with your daughter”, however, this stem generally elicits an open response similar to the other open question stems.

Describe... This stem is similar to “tell” as it generally produces a statement rather than a question.

Why... I personally avoid “why” questions as I feel that they can provoke defensiveness as they are implicitly asking the respondent to justify some aspect of their beliefs, thoughts, emotions, or behaviors.

Examples of closed question stems:

Who...

Is...

Are...

Have...

Can...

Did...

Scaling questions... For example, “On a scale of zero to ten, with zero being no sadness and ten being the most sadness you can imagine feeling, how sad do you feel right now”. Scaling questions are widely used for suicide assessments as well as in solution focused counseling approaches.