

In the spaces below, explore two issues that are related to some problem situation or situations of your own. Try to choose issues that might affect the quality of your helping.

1. Vague statement: Problem.

Concrete statement.

2. Vague statement: Unused Opportunity.

Concrete statement.

Share these with a learning partner. Get feedback on how clear your second statement is. If you do not think that your partner's statement is as clear as it might be, use probes to help him or her make the statement clearer.

USE PROBES TO GAIN CLARITY

EXERCISE 6.2: PROBE FOR KEY ISSUES AND CLARITY

A probe is a statement or a question that invites a client to discuss an issue more fully. In Exercise 6.1, you were asked to probe yourself. Probes are ways of getting at important details that clients do not think of or are reluctant to talk about. They can be used at any point in the helping process to clarify and explore issues, search for missing data, expand perspectives, and point toward possible client actions. Of course, an overuse of probes can lead to gathering a great deal of irrelevant information. The purpose of a probe is not data for its own sake, but information—experiences, behaviors, points of view, decisions, intentions, and feelings—that serve the process of problem management and opportunity development. In this exercise, you will be presented brief problem situations with a bit of context. Your job is to formulate possible probes to help clients move forward in the helping process.

1. First, use empathic responses to understand the client.
2. Next, formulate a probe that might help the client further identify or explore key issues, experiences, behaviors, points of view, decisions, intentions, and feelings.
3. Briefly state how your probe might help the client move forward.

Example: A Caucasian man, 24, complains that he is severely tempted to go on experimenting sexually with women other than his wife: "Although I have not had an extended affair, I have had a few sexual encounters and feel that some day I might have an affair. I don't blame myself or my wife, though I'm not sure I'll ever find the kind of sexual satisfaction I want with her. I've never had such strong sexual urges. I thought that once I was married, the sexual thing would be taken care of. That's certainly not the way things have turned out. I'm not sure where I'm headed."

Empathic statement: "It sounds like your sexual urges are so strong right now that they're in the driver's seat. But you're puzzled and are not quite sure what all this means and where it's going."

Possible probe: "As to where it's going, what are some of the possibilities?"

How might it help the client move forward? To help the client begin thinking through some of the implications of the decisions he's made about his sexual life.

1. Grace, 19, an unmarried, first-year Caucasian college student, comes to counseling because of an unexpected and unwanted pregnancy: "Right now I realize that the father could be either of two guys. That probably says something about me right there. I'm not sure what I want to do about the baby. I haven't told my parents yet, but I think that they will be very upset, but in the end sympathetic. At least I hope so. But I've gotten myself into this mess and I have to get myself out."

Empathic statement.

Possible probe.

How might it help the client move forward?

2. You are a counselor in a halfway house. You are dealing with Tom, 44, who has just been released from prison where he served two years for armed robbery. This was his first encounter with the law. He has been living at the halfway house for two weeks. The halfway house experience is designed to help him reintegrate himself into society. Living in the house is voluntary. The immediate problem is that Tom came in drunk a couple of nights ago. He was supposed to be out on a job-search day. Drinking is against the rules of the house. When you talk to him, he says "I know this looks bad. But I don't think it's as bad as it looks. There was no liquor inside prison. This was my first encounter with

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alcohol since I got out. I guess I just went overboard. I shouldn't have done it, but it's not the end of the world. Or it shouldn't be."

Empathic statement.

Possible probe.

How might it help the client move forward?

3. Arnie is a born-again Christian. He has begun to do a fair amount of informal preaching at his place of employment. While some of his coworkers sympathize with his views, others are turned off. Since he feels that he is being driven by a "clear vision," he becomes more and more militant. His supervisor has cautioned him a few times, but this has done little to change Arnie's behavior. Finally, he is given an ultimatum to talk to one of the counselors in the Employee Assistance Program about these issues or be suspended from his job. He says to the counselor, "I have a duty to spread the word. And if I have a duty to do so, then I also have the right. I'm a good worker. In fact, I believe in hard work. So it's not like I'm taking time off for the Lord's work. Now what's wrong with that?"

Empathic statement.

Possible probe.

How might it help the client move forward?

4. A trainee in the counselor training program makes this statement in his small group: "I do not take criticism well. When I receive almost any kind of negative feedback, I usually smile and seem to shrug it off, but inside I begin to pout. Also, deep inside, I put the person who gave me the feedback on a 'list.' Those on the list have to pay for what they did. I find this hard to admit, even to myself. It sounds so petty. For instance, two weeks ago in the training group I received some negative feedback from Cindy. I felt angry and hurt because I thought she was my friend. Since then I've tried to see what mistakes she makes here. I've even felt a bit disappointed because I haven't been able to catch her in any kind of glaring mistake. It goes without saying that I'm embarrassed to say all this."