

Box 5.8 Examples of Open-Ended Questions

- What—what are the facts/details about a situation?
 Why do you think that you feel the way you do?
 Why is this so important to you?
 Why do you think that you feel the way you do?
- What happened after _____?
 Where—details about location/place
 Where does all of this pain come from?
 Where would you like to see your relationship with _____ a year from now?
 Where do we go from here?
 Where do you plan on being in the future?
 When—various time frames
 When you think about this whole situation, how do you feel?
 When in your life did you realize _____?
 When is it most difficult for you to talk to him?
 When do you think all this started taking place?
 When are you going to be able to move on?
 Who—types of details about the people involved
 Who else in your life has experienced the kind of pain you have surrounding _____?
 Who do you count on for support in your life?
 Who else have you talked to about this?
 Who are your social supports?
 Could—a request for information or clarification
 Could you fill me in on the background?
 Could you give me an example?
 Could you tell me a little more about that?
 Could you help me understand?
- How do you feel about _____?
 How does this whole situation change your view of _____?
 How were things before _____ happened?
 How do you feel about that?
 How do you suppose you could find out more about it?
 How does this affect you?
 How do you suppose this will work out?
 How do you explain this to yourself?
 How does it look right now?
 How do you view the situation?
 How did you feel when that happened?
 How can I be of help?
 Why—reasons or rational
 Why are you so angry at _____?
 Why do you feel such anger toward _____?

Client begin to explore issues and go deeper into the issue or situation. You have begun to probe for deeper meaning, which can lead to new insights, which in turn can lead to change.

Social workers must be careful in using “why” questions. Frequently, clients don’t know why they do something a certain way. Asking them to explain themselves may cause them to become defensive and feel judged, closing down communication (Boyle et al., 2011). The client can feel criticized or blamed. Sometimes clients may not understand their own motives and why they do what they do. Therefore, “why” questions should be asked infrequently and with discretion (Shearor & Hoerfisi, 2015). If the client becomes angry, use a paraphrase or a reflection-of-feeling response and then ask the question another way (e.g., instead of “Why are you so sure you can’t do it on your own?” ask “Please tell me what makes being on your own so hard?”). Box 5.9 demonstrates the social worker asking open-ended questions.

Box 5.9 Latisha—Open-Ended Questions

Latisha is a 30-year-old female client who is struggling to understand a court order. Time spent with her stepdaughters will be every other weekend, five hours at a time. The judge handling the divorce case has ordered her and her ex-husband Frank to attend counseling sessions as part of the divorce decree.

Latisha: I really don’t understand why the judge has required us to be here. We are divorced, and she has made it very clear that I can’t see the girls as often as I would like. I never expected that I would be a mom to a five- and eight-year-old, and now they are being taken away from me.

Social Worker: That sounds like devastating news. (Reflection of feeling)

Latisha: It was. How do I go from seeing them every day to twice a month?

Social Worker: Hmmmm, that is a really good question. Clearly, then, place in your life has been very meaningful. (Praise) How do you see your role as Tuwana’s and Denise’s stepmother? (Paraphrase and open-ended question)

Latisha: I really care about the girls. I have been their mom since they were babies. I am the one the girls came to, not so much their dad. Frank does love them but on his own terms. I feel like they are being ripped from me because we are divorced. Tell me, does that seem fair?

Social Worker: I can tell that this is extremely hard and you don’t understand how the judge could make such a decision. Since you meet with the judge next Tuesday, what are some things that you want to make sure you have a chance to say? (Paraphrase and open-ended question)

In the example in Box 5.9, the social worker combines paraphrasing and reflection of feelings while asking open-ended questions that focus the interview. The social worker is trying to gain a fuller understanding of how Latisha feels and offers a suggestion to plan out what she wants to say to the judge on Tuwana’s and Denise’s behalf.

If the client responds to an open-ended question with a “yes” or a “no,” the social worker can try rephrasing the question. If, after several attempts, the client still does not fully respond, the topic of conversation should be changed (e.g., “I can tell that you don’t want to talk about Andre. Maybe we can talk about him next time. So let’s spend some time discussing your housing situation. I know the landlord has decided to renovate the building. How does this affect you?”). Always ask yourself, “Do I press forward or back off? Which approach will help our relationship grow more trusting?”

Watch as Diane asks Mrs. Kita to tell her more about her job and how she is managing. What open-ended questions would you use to gather more information about her situation?

As with all social work interviewing skills, remember that asking questions in some cultures can be seen as intrusive and rude. One way to address this issue is to ask the question, “Can you tell me about . . . ?” This question allows for client self-determination about sensitive or difficult issues as clients consider whether they would like to discuss this aspect of the problem. Try your hand at writing some open-ended questions using the case example in Box 5.C.