

Box 5.3 C Now You Try It . . . Open-Ended Questions

A 30-year-old male talking to the social worker about his reactions to a car accident six months ago:

"Since my car accident, I'm really afraid to drive again. I get into the car and I feel my heart start to pound and my hands get really sweaty. I don't want to end up behind the wheel and start to panic, but that is what is happening right now. I panic. I've tried to make myself do it, but . . . I can't. I have flashbacks from the accident; the car turned upside down and I'm trapped inside."

A. Additional information needed from the client:

1. _____

2. _____

B. Your reflection of feeling and open-ended question:

1. _____

Closed-Ended Questions

A closed-ended question (e.g., "How many times has your daughter run away?") enables the social worker to check details of the client's narrative for accuracy. They also can help gather small but useful pieces of information, such as date of birth, number of siblings, and number of previous arrests (Cormier et al., 2011). Guiding the interview through a series of questions helps the social worker focus on important issues. Closed-ended questions can also be used to scale the severity, intensity, and/or frequency of a problem. For example, asking your client to rate her level of marital satisfaction (or level of depression, motivation, etc.) on a scale of 1 to 10 is a good way to quickly assess the situation from the client's point of view. Listen as the instructor walks you through how closed-ended questions can provide important details that can enhance and deepen your understanding of the client's situation.

Closed-Ended Questions

Closed-ended questions can also bring into focus a particular issue, and, depending on the answer, the social worker can follow up with related questions. It is helpful to ask questions that relate primarily to the client's present situation. It can be easier to ask a series of questions that require the client to think about a current situation than to reflect on past concerns (Hepworth et al., 2013). Exploring past issues, patterns, and behaviors, especially if brought up prematurely, can be seen as a pitfall or a common error. Box 5.10 demonstrates the social worker asking a series of closed-ended questions.

In the example in Box 5.10, Kyle is initially reluctant to talk. Because the social worker has conveyed her understanding of his situation, he starts communicating. By answering the simple closed-ended question, the client has given the social worker an opening to pursue a deeper understanding of his conflicts with his parents.

Box 5.10 Kyle—Closed-Ended Questions

Kyle is a 14-year-old male student who has been referred to the social worker due to severe conflicts at home. His parents are threatening to send him to his aunt's home in another city.

Social Worker: Tell me about things at home between you and your parents. (Open-ended question)

Kyle: It's okay. I don't really want to talk about this with you.

Social Worker: I know, it's hard to talk to a stranger about your family. (Paraphrasing)

Kyle: It's not me, it's my parents. They order me around all the time. I can't stand all the yelling.

Social Worker: How often do you get yelled at? (Closed-ended question)

Kyle: Probably 15 times a day.

Social Worker: That is a lot. From your point of view, what seems to start the fights? (Lead-in response/open-ended question)

Beginning social workers can overuse closed-ended questions. Be careful not to rely heavily on this skill because the interview can feel more like an interrogation, which may cause the client to feel frustrated with the interview process. The interview can become focused on the social worker, as you are doing all the work and trying to come up with questions and simultaneously the client can sit back and simply answer "yes" or "no."

While closed-ended questions are very useful in pinpointing the details of a situation, asking too many in close succession can make for a superficial interview (or cross examination) that fails to get at underlying issues (Hepworth et al., 2013).

Watch this clip as Louis asks Kim the closed-ended question, "Was it enough to cover your expenses?"

Engagement

Behavior: Use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills to effectively engage diverse clients and communities.

Critical Thinking Question: Explain how a social worker may use open and closed-ended questions to move the interview forward in the helping process.

When working with nonalkative clients, asking a series of closed-ended "yes" or "no" questions can get the interview moving. Pay attention to the client's nonverbal communication, and if you see some form of interest develop, switch to an open-ended question as a follow-up. You may have sparked enough interest to get the client talking more expressively. You can practice forming closed-ended questions using the example provided in Box 5.10.

Box 5.10 Now You Try It . . . Closed-Ended Questions

A 65-year-old female talking to the caseworker at the senior citizens center:

"We've been together for a long time, going on five years. You would think by now my children would accept our marriage. They pretend like my husband doesn't exist. I want them to get along. Is that too much to ask? Sometimes I feel like they treat me as a child. They think he is going to take all my money. Is that crazy or what?"

A. Specific information needed from the client:

1. _____

2. _____

B. Your paraphrase and closed-ended question:

1. _____