

Additional Interviewing Strategies

A. Strategies to Explore Motivation

The Miracle Question

The Miracle Question can be used to elicit clients' goals and needs for their family. Asking this question begins to shift the focus from problems to imagining a future when the problem is solved. A sample Miracle Question would be:

"Suppose while you are sleeping tonight a miracle happens and your problem is solved. What will be different in the morning that will tell you that a miracle has happened?"

There are many variations to this theme. Some clients may react negatively to the use of the word "miracle." Variations might include:

"If everything were perfect in your family, what would it be like?"

"When these problems are solved, what will your relationship with your son be like?"

Satellite Questions

Satellite questions to the Miracle Question help clients identify specific feelings and, most importantly, behaviors that they themselves and others might notice if the miracle happened. They include questions such as:

"What is the first thing you will notice?"

"What will your husband (child, friend) notice that would give him an idea that things are different?"

"When they notice, what will they do differently?"

"When they do that, what might you do?"

Scaling Questions

In this technique, the worker asks the client to rate something on a scale of one to 10 (10 being the highest, one being the lowest). This gives the worker precise information about the client's thoughts, feelings or anxieties about a situation and provides a shared understanding. As a follow-up question, the client can be asked what it would take to move up on the scale. This technique automatically requires the participant's involvement in developing solutions to his/her problem. It is useful in determining the level of motivation, degree of difficulty in accomplishing a task, and fear or anxiety about change, etc.

“On a scale from one to ten, with one being terrible and at your wit's end, and ten being the best you've ever felt, how would you rank your feelings right now?”

A client ranked herself at a two. She said she was close to a one but was not there yet. Next the caseworker asked:

“What would need to happen for you to be able to rank yourself one step higher?”

By asking this scaling question, the mother would be immediately involved in developing her own solutions. She is the one who knows her situation better than anyone. Scaling questions are an easy way to begin the process of inviting clients to engage in the casework relationship.

This type of question can also be helpful in identifying possible barriers to the client/worker relationship. For example:

“On a scale from one to 10, could you rate how helpful my work with you is? Ten means that I am helping you a lot, one means that I am not helping you at all.”
When the client responds, the worker can then ask, “What would it take for you to move up one spot on the scale?”

B. Strategies to Help the Client Stay Invested in the Change Process

Express Empathy

The worker should express an appreciation for the client's situation and the client's emotions, frustrations, anxieties, etc.

“This has got to be really hard to see all these things you need to do. They aren't easy changes to make, but I hope you can see what we're working for. There is an end in sight.”

Use Constructive Confrontation

The ultimate purpose of many interactions with clients is to have them confront their own behavior, to bring maladaptive patterns of behavior to their conscious awareness so that change is possible. Confrontation does not need to be aggressive, loud or unkind. We confront the behavior, not the person. While this may appear to be a fine distinction, saying, *“You said you*

went to the class, but you didn't. Now we have to figure out what to do next," is more constructive than saying, "You've lied to me".

Develop Discrepancy

Clients are often caught in a cycle of repeating maladaptive behavior that is not helpful, but may be the only way they know to cope with the problem. The worker should gently help the client become aware that the behavior is not producing the desired results. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the client's goal and his/her behavior. The worker can pose questions that ask the client whether the behavior is obtaining the intended results, or he/she can ask about the benefits and liabilities of the behavior. This allows the client, rather than the worker, to present a reason for changing and ultimately, provides better motivation. This is a gentle form of confrontation; demeanor is important. He/she must remain genuinely interested and curious, not judgmental or punitive.

Examples:

"How well is this working for you?"

"Is yelling at your son making it better or worse?"

Avoid Argumentation

Caseworkers may feel the need to argue a point, particularly if the client is clearly wrong, not telling the truth or failing to see reason. No one usually concedes their point and the argument often increases hostility. It's possible the client knows he/she is wrong or has done something inappropriate. We need to state our view and empower the client to accept or not accept that.

Support Self-Efficacy

The worker's belief in the client, belief that he/she can influence his/her own thoughts and behavior, is an important motivator. Hope and faith are important elements of change. The message must be that parents can do it; they can change.

Roll with Resistance

In this technique, the caseworker uses the client's resistance to good advantage. For example, a client says, "All you care about is Lisa!" The worker responds with "Sounds like I need to spend some time thinking about how you're feeling." This client expected the caseworker to defend his/her interest in the child's well-being and may be surprised by the interest in him/her.

This technique is also helpful when clients complain about not getting along with the worker. The worker can respectfully respond to the resistance: "Yes, I feel tension in our relationship too. I'd like it to be different, so that we can work together better. What do you think we could do to improve things between us?"

Shift the Focus

It is sometimes more productive to go around a barrier rather than address it head on. This may not be possible when initially intervening to keep a child safe. But, when working with a client on an ongoing basis, there are times that a caseworker can choose to defuse resistance by shifting a client's focus away from what seems to be a barrier toward progress. For example, the client may say, *"I know you want me to stop seeing my boyfriend altogether, but I'm not going to do that!"* The worker may say, *"Let's take it one step at a time. We don't need to make any decisions yet. Let's first talk for a few minutes about joining that support group"*.

Emphasize Personal Choice

Many clients feel powerless in our system and, as a result, will respond by asserting themselves or trying to regain control of the situation. Assure the person that in the end, it is the client who determines what happens. Acknowledging individual choice does not mean that the caseworkers give up his/her authority to ensure a child's safety. It just acknowledges a client's right not to change.

Client: "You can't tell me what I can do! If I want to drink, that's what I'll do."

Caseworker: "You're right. I can't make you change your behavior. It's completely up to you. My job is to make sure you understand the results of that choice".

Reframe

This occurs when a caseworker hears what a client says but offers a new meaning or interpretation for him/her. By restating the thought in a new form, there is a greater chance the client will view the intervention as helpful (Miller and Rollnick, 1991).

Client: "It is just so hard to have to visit my own son in the foster home all the time."

Caseworker: "Yes, but I remember when we first set that up. You didn't think you could go at all, and now you never miss a visit."

C. Strategies to Help Families in Crisis

Ask Questions that Elicit Exceptions

Eliciting exceptions is especially useful in helping clients identify their strengths and how they successfully handled problems in the past and identify coping mechanisms that could be further developed. This type of questioning explores past successes and uses them to work toward solutions.

Questions to elicit exceptions to the current problem ask the family to reflect on times when a problem could have occurred, but did not. The worker then explores what the client did to avert the problem.

“Have you been in this situation before? What did you do that helped?”

“Clearly, there are many times when you do keep track of your daughter, even when you come home from work exhausted. Can you tell me how you do that?”

“You said earlier that it’s not always like this between you and your teenage daughter. Can you tell more about the other times?”

Once the exception has been identified and explored, the caseworker can help the family deliberately and routinely use this strategy in their current situation.

“So, it seems that counseling has helped in the past. That may be a good place to start with this problem as well.”

Ask Questions that Elicit Fears or Anxiety

During times of crisis, clients are often immobilized by fear or anxiety about **what may occur** or about the **uncertainty of change**. These fears are often kept hidden and tend to take on more significance as the client tries to avoid them. It is often helpful to calmly, openly discuss these fears so that the client can move from immobilization to productive problem solving. This process involves three steps:

1. Eliciting the fear or anxiety. Usually a direct question is most useful.

Worker: *“What’s the worst that could happen if your husband and son can’t resolve this?”*

Client: *“I’m afraid he might file charges against him in juvenile court!”*

2. Realistically assessing the likelihood that the fear will be realized.
3. Helping the client develop a plan for how to cope with the feared situation, if it should occur. This helps move from immobilization to problem solving.

“If your husband does file unruly charges on your son, how will you handle that?”

Ask Questions that Elicit Coping Strategies

These questions recognize the client’s strengths, while demonstrating empathy and understanding regarding the client’s **current situation**. This strategy simultaneously engages the client and gathers information about coping strategies.

Examples:

“You’ve had so much to deal with lately. These circumstances would have been hard for anyone. How have you been able to keep taking care of your family?”

“I’m sure there are times when you feel like giving up. What keeps you from doing that?”

“I can only imagine how hard it is to juggle all your family’s needs. How do you take care of yourself?”

References

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