

PROBES

Probes are intended to solicit additional information about the client's thoughts, feelings or behaviors. Probes take two forms. Open-ended questions begin with "what", "how", "when", "where", or "who". Open-ended questions are intended to gather general information about the client's concerns or experiences by allowing clients the freedom to express themselves in the way they are most comfortable. Closed questions start with "are you", "do you", "can you", and so forth. Closed questions are used when specific information is needed in order to help the counselor arrive at conclusions about the client. Both types of probes are important in gathering information in a counseling interview. Often, novice counselors rely too heavily on closed questions and the interview sounds more like an interrogation than a counseling session.

For example:

Open: "What" can you tell me about your close relationships?

Closed: "Are you married or single? Do you get along with your wife? How long have you been married? How old were you at the time? Did your parents approve of your marriage? Does your spouse get along with your parents? Do you get along with her parents?"

In the above example, asking "Are you married or single?" could be interpreted as an indication of the counselor's vested interest in knowing the client's status. The question also presumes that people will be either married or single, which leaves out people in committed relationships who aren't married, particularly people in gay, lesbian or other non-traditional relationships. Sometimes questions dealing with age, religion, or marital status have discriminatory connotations. In answering the open-ended question "What can you tell me about your close relationships?", the client will decide what pertinent information to provide to the counselor. Open-ended questions provide room for clients to express themselves without the imposed categories and values of the counselor.

How a question is asked can give more or less room for the client to focus on the issues of importance to him or her. Probes should be centered on the concerns of the client rather than on the curiosity of the counselor about the client. By using closed questions, the counselor often leads the client to topics of interest only to the counselor. The effect is that the client presents him/herself from the counselor's perspective rather than their own and oftentimes feels misunderstood. If an entire interview were to be conducted with closed questions, the client may never have the opportunity to express the concerns that brought them to counseling in the first place. For that reason, it is often a good idea to begin a session with an open-ended question, such as,

"What brings you into the office at this time?"

"What would you like to talk about today?"

However, even open-ended questions can be leading. Therefore, it is important to use the other basic skills frequently so that the counselor can communicate his or her understanding back to the client. Unless the client feels understood, it won't matter how "open" the questions are that are asked. When a client feels misunderstood, barriers to communication soon develop and the client may self-disclose less or terminate counseling prematurely.