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The art of asking questions

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The following notes are intended to accompany the above presentation. If you would like to talk with me about anything you read here, please get in touch.

Outline of the presentation

If I ask a person a question they have never heard before they may just come up with an answer they have never come up with before. And in so doing, a new option in life may well appear. Something to consider, to think about, to feel, possibly to act on. And the mark of a good question is that it is simply one which is of use to a person. One that generates new thoughts and feelings. Questions may be simple or complex; they may stand alone or be one of a series. They do not need to be clever, they only need to be useful to the person. This presentation is all about asking useful questions in as many interesting ways as possible.

A comment

The talent of asking a useful question is certainly something I would expect counselors and educators to be interested in. But with honesty and genuine regard, asking questions is the basis of good conversation for all of us, and for parents concerned about their children, someone concerned for a friend, at the right moment, the asking of a question can be a considerable gift. It is something we can offer another person when we are worried about them but also want to make sure that they are in control of their own life and their own decisions.

Extraordinary (sometimes outrageous) statements and intriguing questions

The extraordinary statement

What is an extraordinary statement?

I call these statements 'extraordinary' because they may well be unique, or provocative, or risky. They may be unexpected; or different from what a person has heard before. A statement may be 'outrageous' because it speaks that which is usually unspoken; or it names something which has not before been named.

- 'I don't understand why you are arguing with your parents about going out, when you can just climb out the window and leave.'
- 'I'm not surprised you are finding this emotionally draining. But I am really amazed that you haven't been totally overwhelmed by your feelings and are not just lying on the ground in a heap!'
- 'I find it extraordinary that there is so much emotion here in such varied forms. You scream and yell at each other and then laugh together.'
- 'I know it is terrifying for you living with the possibility that your partner may not be alive next year. But it also seems you just can't plan your life...and this must be just plain frustrating.'
- 'It's extraordinary that you haven't just gone completely bonkers with all that has happened!'

The purpose

The intention is to generate new thoughts, feelings in another person. When we are caught up in our lives and often with the difficulties, traumas, dilemmas, excitements and confusions of life, it is not always possible to know what to do, how to proceed. Something truthfully surprising can help illuminate some possible options. It can point towards something we might have overlooked, not noticed, covered over, forgotten about, not considered. The statement may be major or minor, highlighting positives or negatives, accurate or inaccurate. It is part of a process, inviting a response from the person with whom you are working. Their response will tell you what you do next.

Being genuine

To say that you find something amazing, means that you really do find it amazing. To have as part of your policy as a sort of commandment that you will 'be amazed' by what people do seems contrary to the spirit of the idea. If you are not genuinely impressed with what someone has said or done, then don't say that you are. We need then to find what it is that genuinely touches us in some way and comment on that.

Not a technique

This is not a technique to get people to 'do something'. The statements are intentional, hopefully well-worded, truthful and hopefully impactful. They do have the intention of making an offer to a person that might add something for them; a thought, a view, a feeling; so that a person can start to take the steps that they need to take to a fuller, more complete life. This process and what we offer within it, also need to be totally genuine.

Not just a positive ‘spin’

- This is not simply a ‘let’s look on the bright side’ approach. To notice a person’s success, triumph or effort is more than this. It highlights a reality. ‘What you have gone through was a genuine trauma. Yet you have survived and survived magnificently.’
- ‘You have been using drugs for 3 years. Yesterday you didn’t use at all. You have been just heroic in controlling your drug use.’

Sometimes, because of their pain, or sense of self, or out of sheer habit, people just don’t notice these things. With the same honesty and intent, sometimes a statement is to name some intense hurt or pain, to offer a view about a cruel act, to highlight an important decision.

- ‘Perhaps if you don’t do anything you’ll just slowly go mad.’
- ‘It must be scary facing the prospect of being on your own.’
- ‘I can’t actually imagine anyone going through what you have experienced, and not being deeply hurt by it.’

Developing ‘good eyes’

People are constantly involved in extraordinary events throughout their lives. This is in front of us, and seeing this is up to us. Describing what we see in a useful way is also up to us. But in doing this we don’t have to see everything; nor do we need to always have stunning statements, and they don’t always even need to be correct. We are not telling the future or ‘looking inside someone’s head’. We are trying to see what it is that is there to be seen, and trying to offer a comment to a person about what we see in as useful a way as possible. The fact that we may be wrong doesn’t in itself, matter. The person will let us know. If it is not this then what might it be? This creates an opportunity for an exchange with the person with whom we are interacting. That person may tell us what it is that we think we are seeing and why we are seeing this. Or they may have another view altogether. And for our part as the counselor type person, we may still decide that we still do see what we thought we saw! And we can say so. It is all part of the exchange. Set answers and ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’ are unimportant in this process. What is important is that this is a genuine exchange aiming to be useful, and part of a process.

Intriguing questions

The aim of questions

The purpose in asking a question may be to help a person find an answer. But it also may aim to raise further questions. A person may be encouraged to ask themselves:

- ‘How will I know if this relationship is still what I want?’
- ‘Am I just used to this part of my life, or is this really how I want things to be?’

And these questions may foster further exploration of something important to the person. The questions may highlight a dilemma, or a potential choice:

- ‘I don’t want to change this but at the same time it really upsets my partner/friend/parents, and I really care about them.’

- ‘How can I get my anger under control so that this relationship/friendship/job can continue?’

A question which intrigues can be anything at all:

- ‘What would life be like if you really did make that decision?’
- ‘What could you do, so that you actually surprised yourself?’
- ‘Which would be more painful...to stay as you are, or to make that change?’

When a question is not a question

Questions don't just need to be something with a ? at the end of them. In fact the reverse may well be true. ‘Don't you think it would be better if...?’ is a statement pretending to be a question. Whereas a statement like: ‘that's the most extraordinary thing I've ever heard!’ may well have the same impact as a genuine question because it invites some thought, some inquiry in the other person.

Not value free

Every question we ask, means that we feel that the issue it addresses is worth looking at. This is a judgment. There will be issues that we do not pursue. This is a judgment. We will use these words rather than those words. This is a judgment. As is the tone and style of delivery. Such judgments are not only unavoidable, but a desirable part of the process. We are asking questions deliberately to explore something because we think it will benefit this person in some way. However, whether we are trying to shepherd a person into our preferred choice, or whether we are genuinely trying to help a person explore new options for themselves, can be a fine line; and it is an issue for our own scrutiny, our consciences and our supervisors.

Which questions to ask

A ‘good’ question is one which generates something new and useful for the person who hears it. Finding such questions is the task of the worker. It is probably the reality that most of our questions will be pretty ordinary, some will be real ‘duds’, but hopefully there will also be the occasional ‘goodie’ as well.

Generating questions other than with words

Theatre activities, asking a person to strike a pose to represent a thought or a feeling, is a question. Asking someone to rate their day on a scale from 1 which is ‘awful’ to 10 which is ‘wonderful’ is obviously a question. Asking a person to draw a picture of an important moment in their life is a question. They are all questions because they invite new thoughts and feelings. They ask us to consider and reconsider our lives, to notice those things which we need to work on, and importantly to notice those things we care most about.

I hope you do the same from time to time. Best wishes in being of help to others.

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