

Helpful Types of Questions¹ for Finding Solutions

Type of question	Why it's helpful	Examples	Tips
Open ended questions	<u>A</u> llow the widest range of responses. Answers typically reveal a person's frame of reference, and how they think about their life and situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Can you tell me a little about your children (your relationship with your husband, etc)?</i> • <i>What are you most proud of about your children (your parenting, yourself, etc)?</i> • <i>Can you say a little bit more about that? I didn't quite understand.</i> 	
Who, what, when, where and how questions	Provides structure and sets up parameters for the information you need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What happened when you decided not to drink?</i> • <i>When you decide to count to 10, what will you do differently?</i> • <i>How do you get yourself out of difficult situations? What helps the most?</i> • <i>How will you make sure your children are safe in the future?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid "why" questions because within a child protection context they tend automatically to make people defensive (i.e. "why did you make that decision?"). Use "how come" instead of "why". • When talking about future changes always ask WHEN rather than IF, because it implies trust that change will occur, and it's just a matter of time.
Coping questions	Conveys understanding of the difficulties s/he is experiencing while recognizing his/her strengths and resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How are you doing as well as you are with all the things going on in your life?</i> • <i>Having four children must be stressful. How do you keep going day after day? What helps?</i> • <i>Considering how long you've been drinking and how tough the week has been, it must have been challenging to stay sober for the whole week. How did you do it?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think "How do you do it?" and "How come it's not worse?"

¹ From Berg, I.K. and Kelly, S. (2000) *Building Solutions in Child Protective Services*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Relationship questions	Encourage thinking about how others would describe them or their behavior. Heighten a person's awareness of how their behaviors impact people important to them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What do you think your children would say they like best about when you are sober?</i> • <i>What do you think you son would say he felt when he saw your hitting his mother?</i> • <i>What would your daughter say that it took you to get out of bed this morning?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Especially helpful with individuals whose behaviors are more harmful to others than to themselves (i.e. verbally and physically abusive parents, people who claim to have no control over their behavior, etc). • The third example is a type of relationship question that can be particularly helpful when people express that they feel unable to make even a small change (due to depression, hopelessness, etc).
Exception-seeking questions	Help a person slow down and consider moments when they made a choice not to (hit their child, or take a drink).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Tell me about times when your wife didn't have dinner on the table when you came home, but you didn't end up giving her a black eye. How did you decide to respond differently?</i> • <i>You've told me that you hit your daughter because she wouldn't stop crying. Have there been times when she's cried a lot and annoyed you, but you didn't hit her? Can you tell me about that?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answers may seem insignificant to you or the other person, but they provide a place from which to build more safety. • If the person can't seem to answer your exception-seeking question, ask "What would your (wife, husband, child, best friend) say about how you managed to walk away rather than striking out?"
Scaling questions	Gauge confidence, hopefulness, safety, willingness to take action, and many other topics that are difficult to describe with words.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>On a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 stands for "completely confident or certain", and 0 stands for "not sure at all" where would you put yourself in being able to follow through on the safety plan we just developed?</i> • <i>On a scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is "I'm definitely going to go to the batterer intervention program" and 1 is "I'm not at all sure I'm going to go" where would you put yourself? Why? How could you be more certain that this is what you're going to do? What will it take to move you up one notch?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scaling questions are helpful for "taking the pulse" of a group of people about the level of safety of children they perceive. Go around the room and ask each person where they are on the scale from "Perfectly safe, no worries" to "I think this child is in real danger". Then ask what people would need to see to move one step closer together. • "Clients" tend to give themselves higher ratings than "professionals" do. Ask people (clients and professionals) to provide their thinking or reasoning for the number they gave.

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Miracle or Hoped-for Future question	Helps people generate descriptions of their dreams, visions, and aspirations for their lives, which then become part of the intervention goals.	<p><i>Most effective way to ask:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>You'll be going home later to do the things you need to do, like making dinner, putting the kids to bed, and so on. Imagine that when all of your family members are sleeping tonight and the house is quiet, in the middle of the night a miracle happens. The miracle is that all of the problems you have with your children (or that other people think you have) are solved. Because this happens while you are sleeping, no one knows that the problems have been solved. So, when you are just waking up, what differences will you notice that make you wonder if there was a miracle overnight? What will it look like?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be difficult for people to respond to initially. Have patience. If the person responds in a way that is blaming of someone else, use other types of questions to generate self-reflection. (I.e. My son would be calm and like a different kid. "Okay, so he'll be calm. What do you suppose he would say about how you will be different tomorrow morning?")
How is that helpful? How helpful is that? How well does that work?	Implies that the person must be trying to help him/herself. Also interrupts their expectation that they will once again be told that what they are doing is wrong.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>So how is your drinking helpful to you in your life?</i> <i>How well does hitting your son work to get him to stop his annoying behaviors?</i> <i>How helpful is it to your goal of reducing your financial stress for you to prohibit your wife from working at a paid job?</i> 	
How do you know he/she can do this?	Engages a person in a different way of thinking, so interrupts patterns of thought that may have contributed to the problem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>You know your son well enough to believe that he can learn to be respectful and stop telling you that he hates you. What do you know about him that makes you believe he can do this?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Especially helpful when a parent has unrealistic expectations of a child. Allows opportunity for validation of prior efforts, exploration of how well those efforts have worked, and planning new strategies for encouraging desired behaviors.

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What else?	Encourages a person's participation in development of solutions, and enhances self-esteem. Helps person identify their own strengths and resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What else did you do to try to keep him away from you? How well did that work? What else?</i> • <i>What else do you need to do to make sure that you can stay sober for the next week?</i> • <i>How else will you make sure you can "hold your tongue" so that your daughter will feel safe with you?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask this frequently and persistently to uncover a full picture of what a person has already done or tried to improve the situation.
Then what did you do? What happened next? How does that usually go?	Helps focus on behaviors and decisions (and patterns in some cases) rather than thinking in generalities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>So you said your husband came home drunk and you got angry. What did you say to him? What did he say to you?</i> • <i>You said your son went into his room and blasted his music after you told him to do his homework. What did you do after he went into his room? Then what?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use opportunities that arise in the description of what happened to ask questions such as "What do you think your son would say he was feeling at that point?" or "How do you think your yelling that you were going to kill her sounded to the children?"
What have you thought about doing?	Empowers a person to generate their own solutions, even if they have not taken action.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>So I hear that you want your relationship with your wife to be better. What have you thought about doing to make that happen?</i> • <i>I know you said that you can't stop yourself from hitting your child when you're angry. What else have you thought about doing?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid telling people what YOU think they should/could do, because they are far more inclined to do the things that THEY come up with themselves. • Ask frequently.
Suppose . . .?	Helps a person not feel stuck, helps them imagine a different future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Suppose your son had the better attitude that you want him to have. What would change between the two of you?</i> • <i>Suppose your mother doesn't give you the help you need. What else could you do to get that support somewhere?</i> 	

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