

Five Useful Questions in Couples Therapy

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This article describes an approach to couples counselling in which the use of questioning is the major therapeutic intervention. It describes my journey from using questions to gather information to employing questions as clinical interventions in their own right. It notes that small questions can change the tone, mood and direction of the session, while bigger questions open up the social and moral context of couple life. Five examples of these 'bigger' questions are described. I conclude that successful questions open up new areas for discussion, avoid a narrow 'problem' focus, and stimulate yet more questions.

In a conventional session, most of the therapist's questions ostensibly are designed to help him or her formulate an assessment. The questions themselves are not normally regarded as interventions to help clients. Yet, many questions do have therapeutic effects on family members (directly) through the implications of the question and/or (indirectly) through the verbal and non verbal responses of family members to them (Tomm, 1987: 3).

Introduction

For over 20 years I have had a fascination with the therapeutic possibilities of the use of questions in couples counselling and this paper maps my journey in the use of questioning to produce relationship change.

When I left the Family Court and began private practice in 1986, I was excited about new possibilities in couples work. For the previous six years I had worked almost exclusively with separating couples in the court context and become worn down by the sense of 'too little too late' that accompanied court counsellors' work as they engaged with separation issues and new parenting arrangements. Limitations of time and restrictions inherent in legal processes reduced the scope and duration of my couple work, and pressure to reach a parenting agreement in counselling was often frustrating to both clients and counsellors. I began private practice with a desire to 'open up' the conversation with couples and expand the possibilities of shared ideas about the experience of being in an ongoing relationship. I was intrigued by Tomm's way of thinking and in

particular by the way questions could open up the session to an enormous range of possibilities.

So, I began to ask couples questions, at first hesitantly, but gradually with a sense of freedom and excitement that made the work feel very different from what I had known. My focus shifted from a reasonably ordered and sequential exploration of a couple's relationship problems to a more free-floating question and answer session. I tried to push the boundaries of what was acceptable to talk about and I made it my goal to give the couple an interesting and different experience of talking together. I saw that stalemates in relationships were usually paralleled by a conversational stalemate ('Whenever I say this he/she says that') and I quickly noticed that when I asked questions that stimulated curiosity, both partners were able to engage with me and one another in a re-energised conversation. I remembered earlier definitions of therapy as 'a corrective emotional experience' (Alexander, 1946: 66–70) and questions seemed to offer the couple a 'corrective experience' of being able to talk to one another differently. It soon became clear that this was a very different sort of therapeutic conversation.

The most obvious difference was that the mood in the room changed dramatically. Sadness, guilt, blame and recrimination were replaced by curiosity, thoughtfulness and an enthusiasm for talking that I had rarely encountered in earlier couples work. At the same time my own experience of the work was quite different. I felt much lighter, much freer to move in unusual directions and most importantly I felt free of the burden to take a position or comment on complaints partners had about one another. I remembered Michael White's advice to be wary of 'problem saturated conversations' and by use of questions was able to keep conversations moving into, out of, and around the heavy ground.



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Small Questions

When I began working in this way and experienced such a shift in mood, I was curious about how far this could go. I found myself pushing the boundaries of what was 'appropriate' to talk about in sessions. I began to play with the idea that it might be more helpful to unhappy couples to provide them with an interesting and entertaining conversation with me and simply ignore the stated reason for their seeking help. I wondered whether the improvement in their talk with one another around trivial subjects might help them communicate better about serious issues.

I found myself responding to almost anything clients said with a question. I made no distinction between serious and trivial questions. Any comment from one of the pair elicited a question from me. If they told me the traffic was heavy I asked which way they had come, about who drove the car, whether that person always drove, whether they were happy with that driving arrangement. If they had dropped children at school on the way I asked about the children, the school, why they chose that school, whether they wanted their children to have the same or different type of schooling to themselves. If they had been to a movie I asked about their favourite films, actors, cinemas.

All these types of questions soon had both partners engaging with me and one another in an open and animated conversation. Sometimes this sort of talk occupied all or most of the session and I lived in trepidation of being told, *We didn't come here to talk about this!* Sometimes I would ask whether it was okay to keep talking like this or whether we should get on with the problem. Almost always couples wanted to keep going the way we were. My measure for the effectiveness of the session was the degree to which each took part in the session and the mood between the partners at the end of the session. I remembered the following description of Socrates:

... his most curious feature was a habit of approaching Athenians of every class, age and occupation and bluntly asking them, without worrying whether they would think him eccentric or infuriating, to explain with precision why they held certain commonsense beliefs and what they took to be the meaning of life (De Botton, 2000: 14–15).

Big Questions

Although I had wanted to explore whether, by concentrating on small questions, I could let the big questions look after themselves, I came to see that something more was needed.

One's behaviour to a partner is shaped by numerous assumptions about oneself, the other and the world. I wanted to explore the thinking behind what we do in relationships. I wanted to reshape our conversation from the 'I' to the 'We' and try to develop an increased relationship consciousness. I needed some bigger questions to be used in conjunction with the smaller ones. Smaller questions remain an excellent circuit breaker and mood lifter and

seemed to allow the couple to approach the bigger questions with much more confidence in their ability to communicate. Gradually I began to devise questions that invited couples to connect with the thinking behind their thinking and to have a relationship conversation without blame and despair.

Question One

'How did you get the courage to talk to a stranger about your relationship?'

This question reflects my wish to understand the experience of the couple seeking help and conveys my respect for the work they are undertaking. Many people have told me of their anxiety about approaching counselling with their partner and expressed their fear that it will make things worse. I do think it takes courage and I see their seeking help as an act of trust on their part, eliciting a corresponding sense of responsibility on mine. Unlike individual counselling, couples work carries the risk that your account of your feelings and experiences may be challenged and denigrated by your partner in front of a third person. I put a lot of effort into creating a safety net at the start of the process and often reassure people that I will do my best to help them make it better but that I will also act to prevent it getting worse.

Question Two

'Do you think the problems in the relationship are more to do with things inside or things outside the relationship?'

This question addresses my abiding interest in the connection between personal and public life. Most couples seek explanations for their unhappiness in popular accounts of happiness, which frequently bear little connection with lived experience. So at first the question is often answered by reference to perceived personal faults or immutable differences between them — *'We have a communication problem'* and *'We are just such different people'* — perceptions that offer little encouragement or hope for change.

This question, and variants upon it, open up other ways of thinking about the relationship. For example,

- *How does your work affect your relationship with your family?*
- *When your children have problems, do you feel closer or further apart as a couple?*
- *Does the frightening state of the world conflict impact on your relationship?*
- *Do tensions in your families of origin affect your relationship?*

Close questioning about the social context opens up avenues that feel more manageable and seem potentially more receptive to change than fixed definitions of difference. This question may also elicit stories of a traumatic event, often the death of a loved one, that offer further reflections on the pain in the relationship, and opportunities for shared and overdue

grieving for such a loss can be the most helpful part of couples work.

Context questions offer the possibility of locating pain more accurately at its source. We know that in intimate relationships unresolved feelings from elsewhere are often projected onto one's partner. I sometimes offer the observation that there's no point having a partner and blaming oneself for feeling unhappy! A partner who speaks of losing feeling for the other can be asked:

- *Have you lost feelings for anyone or anything else?*
- *Has this happened before, and how long did it last?*
- *What parts of your life do you have good feelings about?*
- *How could you tell if you were depressed or unhappy in your relationship?*

In this way a person can be helped to explore not just *that* it hurts but *where* it hurts.

Question Three

'What do you notice about other relationships that is like or unlike your own?'

This question invites a curiosity about other relationships and offers the couple the chance to identify their relationship expectations. Almost all couples I see think that their relationship is much worse than others they know, though when asked how they know, it turns out to be mostly guesswork. We are all curious about other people's relationships and reality TV offers the chance to be voyeurs in relation to others. However, what we see on TV are people who are pretending to live their private lives, but because they do so for public consumption, the experience is inevitably falsified. The truth, of course, is that the substance of our behaviour with our partners remains mostly behind closed doors and not available to outsiders.

However, where other couples are perceived as being happier, questions about why they seem to be happy, and what things they do that seem to help their relationship can sharpen the focus on ways of living together that can be enhancing. Couples often notice for example that others are better at fighting and making up, and questions around styles of conflict management explore alternative behaviours.

I sometimes tell stories other couples tell me — good and bad — about their relationship, and invite couples to comment on them. These sorts of conversations broaden our focus on the world of relationships and provide much needed input on the scope and nature of other peoples' struggles to be happy together. Almost always, a couple is much relieved by these accounts and able to understand their own situation in a more comfortable light.

Question Four

'If your relationship does improve, which of you will be more likely to have changed?'

I move very lightly and tentatively around the issue of change and want to protect my position of 'curious

onlooker' very carefully. We know that holding the middle ground is essential in couples work and to respond to pressure from one partner to push the other to change can be to lose the ability to move freely in other parts of the conversation. However, I do want to keep the idea of change somewhere in the background so that we may be able to notice it if and when it comes.

I might ask this question with the disclaimer that I am not encouraging anyone to change but inviting both to wonder about the possibility of a different experience with one another. Questions about life changes each has been through, and questions about changes in their life together offer the perspective of a relationship as a work in progress and change as inevitable. Our work together can then be characterised as facilitating a change process that has become temporarily stuck and needs moving.

The image here is of the therapist as the plumber unblocking the drains rather than the doctor performing open-heart surgery! A question that reflects my notion of change is: *'Do you think your stuckness is because of who you are or have you just developed some bad habits?'*

Question Five

'Did you learn anything in your own family that has helped or hindered you in this relationship?'

I have left this question till last, though many therapists see family of origin work as central to understanding current relationships. By asking about family history in this way, I explore the client's perception about the connection between the past and the present. Some clients see earlier family life as very influential on present life and some do not. I want to understand the person's own framework of explanation and work as far as possible within that. I certainly do not want to spend a long time taking family histories where this is seen as irrelevant to present concerns.

Another more oblique question about earlier life, *'Are you trying to be the same sort of parent as your mother/father was to you'*, invites reflections about who we are and where we come from.

Both of these questions about the past are seen as relevant to current concerns and seem to elicit less inhibited conversations than more formal history-taking questions. As with all bigger questions, the client's response determines further questions and allows me to present myself as simply curious about why they think people act as they do, without being seen to privilege any particular explanation.

Conclusion

In developing these questions it has been necessary to eliminate other interventions I previously relied on. I gave up most inquiries about factual information and concentrated on exploring attitudes. I have tried to minimise talk about problems and solutions and pushed couples to think about how they think about relationships and family life. The challenge to keep the conversation open and moving

forward is a constant one for the couple therapist. Invitations to follow a trail into dark and depressing problem areas can be politely sidestepped by a question which opens up an alternative pathway. Tomm himself notes how easily we can be drawn back into a problem focus even when the couple have moved on.

One of my 'innocent' questions appeared to have stimulated the re-emergence of serious marital conflict. It occurred during a follow up session in which the couple were talking about the fact that they had not had any arguments for several weeks. In other words, there had been a major improvement in the marriage. After a lively and enjoyable discussion about these changes I asked 'What problems would you like to talk about today?' Following this seemingly innocuous question, the couple gradually drifted into a bitter argument about which of the two of them needed further therapy. I privately reconstructed the improvement as 'transient and unstable' and resumed my treatment of their chronic marital difficulties. I remained completely blind to the fact that I had inadvertently triggered the deterioration until a colleague pointed it out to me on the videotape. In retrospect the assumption behind the question ... that problems needed to be identified and/or clarified before I could act therapeutically ... turned out to be limiting and pathogenic (Tomm, 1987: 4).

We can now speculate that it may have been more helpful to this couple to ask some questions about the positive

change they had reported, e.g. what had they done differently to avoid arguments, what does it feel like to stop arguing, and how long they hoped the change would last.

So, questions that seem helpful in couples work have a defining feature: viz, that they open rather than close the scope of the conversation, that they avoid too directly a focus on problems and finally, that they encourage more questions. My own experience of working with couples in this way is that the shared experience of investigating couple life can turn the process into one where original problems brought to counselling often dissolve and are in turn replaced by a more co-operative and curious relationship.

References

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First Time in My Life

First time in my life
I've looked out a window and seen the snow
falling.
Falling into my working day I mean
Falling into my life
As opposed to the times I've gone looking for it
Seen it on the news
Got in the car all rugged up
And gone searching
Like a small holiday.

This time I'd simply risen and showered
In the warm house we'd shared together
As if everything was normal
Driven to the work we'd shared together
As if everything was OK
As if everything would go on
Being this way

As opposed to the distance that is now between us.

I hope the boy you found and loved
Still loves you. I hope the fire you had
In your heart still burns for you
When you want it to
Not when you don't like it did
Between us two. I hope
One day you may look out the window
And see the snow falling and think of me
Without rancour, without bitterness
Without regret. With only the knowledge
Of that cold place we left
And the clean snow falling.



Lyndon Walker
Saturday, August 4, 2001,
4.15 pm.