



Promoting Psychological Wellbeing at Every Level

SUPPORTING CLIENTS TO COPE DURING COVID-19

**A practical guide for case managers, solicitors and
rehabilitations therapists as 'helpers' supporting anxious clients
during this time of uncertainty**

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Dear Colleague

After writing a guide about self-care reminders for professional helpers during this time, it occurred to me that we are still seeing our clients and sometimes their care teams – often remotely – and the work we are doing for them is hugely shrouded with increased anxiety due to C-19. I'm hearing a lot from colleagues that conversations are more fearful and nervous, sadness is real and pessimism can feel realistic. Then there's the systemic element of the work we do, relying more on care teams and families since interactions are remote via phone or video-call, each of which bringing their own frequency of anxiety to the discussions.

Never before has our professional judgement been so tested and our reliance on the bond we have built (*our therapeutic alliance*) been so needed to keep us in vital touch with our clients' needs and to help as best we can with their care and rehabilitation.

Yet, the fear, anxiety, panic and pessimism can underline much of the quality of the interactions with our clients, their families and their care teams at the moment: whether it's about infection control, reassurance of the care rota and absences due to (potential and actual) illness, family challenges about practises in place to manage C-19, or worries about an interrupted rehabilitation package.

As a Clinical Psychologist, I, too, can see just how much harder it is at the moment to navigate these anxieties! I therefore thought it might be helpful to share some talking therapy questions that have been helpful during this time to me and my team here at PsychWorks Associates.

This guide contains questions to help support and encourage our clients, their families and care teams to cope in the current situation. Using ideas from Positive Psychology, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Compassion-Focussed Therapy (CFT), this guide offers open questions you can use to create a safe and accepting climate for our client to express their concerns and cope better. Some mindfulness exercises are included, too. As always, take what you would need from this guide – feel free to leave whatever does not suit. Please also remember that this is just a bank of ideas to help support you in supporting your clients. Should discussions seem high risk (eg unsafe to self or others), then a referral to a qualified talking therapist would be warranted.

On behalf of our team, I sincerely hope that this guide can prove helpful to you and that there is something, even if just one thing, in here that can support you during this tricky time.

Wishing you safety and general good health.



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Listening (setting the scene, part 1)

Listening is known to be a core requirement in understanding people's emotional needs. Without it, we are unlikely to connect sufficiently with our clients for them to feel safe enough to share their stories and experiences. In other words, the bond between you and your client is built on helpful listening.

To understand what effective listening is also means to understand what listening is not. As a gentle reminder of this central point, we have put the "dos and don'ts" below:

Effective listening skills	Less helpful listening habits
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paying non-verbal attention eg eye-contact, nodding, "uh-huh" • Acceptance of what the client is feeling eg "I understand/hear you" • Enquiring about feelings and their causes through open questions eg "How did that feel?" • Summarising to identify the core issue eg "Sounds like you're saying..." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumptions eg "I know you don't think this, but..." • Judgements eg "That seems extreme" • Criticism eg "Why didn't you do X instead?" • Listening to disagree eg "Sure, but..." • Closed questions eg "Are you feeling better?"



Open questions and summarising for a safe, accepting space (setting the scene, part 2)

Asking questions is an important part of being a good listener, but it's important to remember that there are several different types of questions, and different kinds of questions should be asked in different situations.

In particular, **open questions** are questions that cannot be answered in a few words because they tend to close a conversation down. They encourage the client to speak and offer an opportunity to gather information about the client and their concerns. Typically open questions begin with:

- What...?
- Why...?
- How...?
- Could...?

Regular **summarising** at points throughout the conversation can provide 'checking-in' opportunities while further cementing the sense of being 'on the same page' and the person's sense of feeling heard in a safe place. Summarising could look like:

- It sounds like you're saying...
- Have I summarised that correctly?
- Have I missed anything?
- Anything else?

Open questions and summarising help to create the kind of safe relationship that is so crucial for change to occur.

Within this environment, acceptance is fostered and we can then ask questions to structure and steer the conversation towards further enquiry or goals and plans.

The next sections will focus on some of those questions from three different therapeutic stances: Positive Psychology, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Compassion-Focussed Therapy (CFT). But, first, we briefly visit the three approaches...

(The questions start on p8 should you wish to skip straight to them)

Brief introduction 1/3: Positive Psychology and the PERMA model

In the 90s, Martin Seligman, an American psychologist, was instrumental in pushing forward the Positive Psychology movement after being influenced by Csikszentmihalyi's work on *flow* in the 70s. Seligman's idea was to move away from a typical 'deficit model' of human functioning to instead focus on optimising one's abilities in a given context.

Amongst other aspects, Positive Psychology aims to create a sense of contentment and wellbeing in the present. To this end, there is a focus on various roles such as confidence, hope, our strengths, meaning, contentment and satisfaction in life.

Seligman (2011) says our sense of wellbeing is contributed to by helpful actions in five key elements of cognition – he has converted his theory into the mnemonic, 'PERMA':

<u>Element</u>	<u>Related actions</u>
P ositive emotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spending time on healthy and positive experiences. • Viewing your past and future from an optimistic stance.
E ngagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immersing ourselves in worthwhile pursuits. • Applying our strengths in the pursuit of a goal. • Being so absorbed that time feels like it's flown.
R elationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting positively with others
M eaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acting with purpose.
A ccomplishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having a sense that one's actions contribute to a greater goal or something greater than oneself (eg community). • Achieving goals, managing setbacks, growing, learning and developing.

By considering open questions with our clients and their families and care teams, we can allow some of the PERMA elements to manifest in our conversation, and there is then a better chance that wellbeing can be improved. Some open questions are offered on p8.

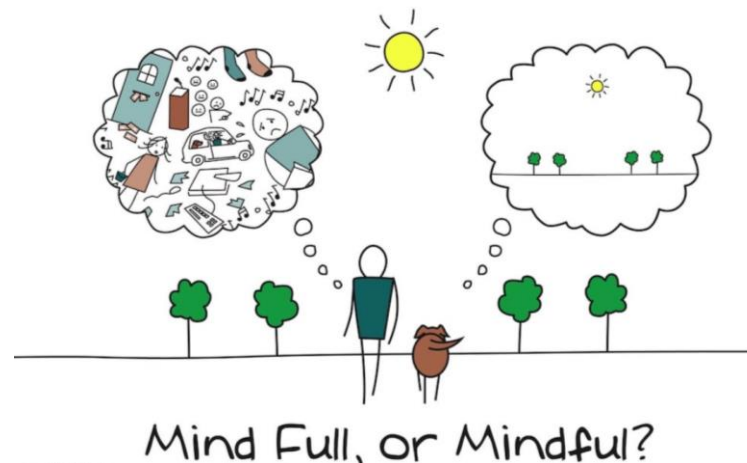
Brief introduction 2/3: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Mindfulness

In the early 80s, Stephen Hayes developed ACT to allow those in distress to be present with what life brings and to make authentic shifts toward behaviours they value. ACT invites people to sit alongside unpleasant feelings, and learn not to overreact to them, so as not to avoid situations where they are invoked. The acronym below defines ACT as:

- **A**ccepting your reactions and be present
- **C**hoosing a valued direction
- **T**aking action

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing at any given moment, and to not be overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us. It is increasingly recognised as an effective way to enhance life fulfilment and reduce stress, amongst other benefits. Mindful practises focus on the breathe and they use meditation ideas to help capture and release unhelpful thoughts and feelings that contribute to anxiety, stress and distress.

By considering open questions with our clients and their families and care teams, we can better encourage a mindful and less avoidant way of *being* to see a situation as less negatively impacting. Open questions that fit this approach are available on p8.



Brief introduction 3/3: Compassion-Focussed Therapy (CFT) and compassion itself

In the early 2000s, Paul Gilbert developed Compassion-focussed Therapy (CFT). He suggests that emotional struggles can, in part, come from an imbalance between three key systems (threat, motivation and comfort). CFT aims to restore balance by replacing feelings of hostility and insecurity toward oneself with compassion and understanding so that individuals can begin to soothe themselves, accept soothing from others, and generate feelings of contentment and safety.

CFT combines mindfulness, compassion and acceptance on a single path that can transform the mind and help pursue greater meaning and happiness in life.

In fact, compassion is thought to be one of the most important declarations of strength and courage known to humanity. While it is difficult, it is also powerful, contagious and influential. It is motivational and some say, world-changing because of the impact compassionate behaviours can have on individuals, as well as the world at large.

If we as a team are able to encourage our clients (and indeed ourselves) to be a little more compassionate with themselves and others through our questions, we are potentially offering them some relief from their burdens. We explore some of these types of questions next.



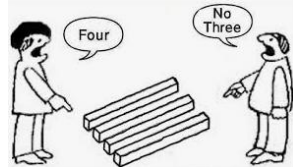









OPEN QUESTIONS USING PERMA, MINDFULNESS IDEAS, AND COMPASSION

So far, we have suggested that as helpers working with clients, their families and care teams, we are likely to come across more anxiety and distress than normal in the current situation which can make us feel unfamiliar in knowing how to provide helpful and safe support.

We highlighted that when someone feels safe and accepted, the connection between two people can grow to explore new and potentially helpful ideas. One way of demonstrating safety and acceptance is through open questions. Together with non-judgemental summarising, helpers can feel better equipped to support a client, their family and care team in managing their understandable worry and stress at this time.

This next section offers some guiding open questions under the following topics:

<p>Opening up a conversation</p> 	<p>Identifying a topic to discuss</p> 	<p>Understanding a perspective</p> 	<p>Redressing balance (when a conversation is problem-saturated or negative)</p> 	<p>Refocusing on what is controllable</p> 
<p>Drawing out coping strategies</p> 	<p>Exploring values</p> 	<p>Encouraging self-compassion</p> 	<p>Identifying resources</p> 	<p>Supporting practical ideas and actions</p> 

*****Please note, these are ideas to help alleviate any additional client worry and stress caused during this uncertain time. They are not designed to put pressure on you as a helper nor to replace the role of skilled and trained psychotherapists. If you feel that you do not have the capacity to address your clients' emotional needs in this way, please be compassionate to yourself and we urge you to get in touch, especially if you feel your client is at risk in any way*****

1. Opening a conversation

How are you?

How have things been since we last spoke?

How are things going at the moment?

What did you do today/this week?

2. Identifying a topic to discuss

What would you like to talk about?

What has been happening at home with your family/care team?

What's on your mind at the moment?

What's thoughts are floating around at the moment?

3. Understanding someone's perspective

Tell me more about...

How are you feeling [about that issue]?

Give me an example [of that issue].

What did that look/sound like?

In what way do you mean that?

Explain to me what is particularly concerning about the situation.

I imagine you might be feeling [X, Y].

4. Redressing balance (when a conversation is problem-saturated or negative)

What are you noticing that is positive or nurturing?

What are some of the less-bad things at the moment [in your family, care)?

What's going well?

What can you be grateful for at the moment?

How can you achieve a moment of calm for yourself?

5. Refocusing on what is controllable

Which aspect(s) of your situation can you influence in some way?

What are your strengths?

On a scale from 0-10, how much control do you have over that?

Who can help you? Family member, care team, therapist?

What have you actually got control over?

Focus on breathing: In for 4 and out for 6

6. Drawing out coping strategies

What are some ways – however small – in which you can look after yourself/those you live with/work with you?

What (small) positive difference could you make today?
To yourself?
To others?

Who could you connect with?

What helps you to feel more alive?

How can you use your time to benefit you?

What can you say to yourself that would be helpful, affirming, encouraging?

7. Exploring values

Who am I striving to be? How can I take a step closer to that model?

What is it that you want to do purpose in life?

What values or principles do you live your life by?

How can you reflect them in your actions?

In what area of your life? With whom?

On the other side of this situation, what would you like to look back on having done/behaved like?

And what would you like others to say about you when this situation is over?

8. Encouraging self-compassion

When were you last proud of yourself? What did you do?

What would you say to a friend who said that?

How can I send some positivity to myself? To others?

If you wanted to be kind to yourself, what would you say? What would you do?

How can you look after yourself in the coming days and weeks?

What inspires you?

What can you savour today?

What can you do for fun?

9. Identifying resources

What do you have inside you that is going to help you?

What are your strengths?

Who do you connect with who can help you?

Tell about a success of yours? How did you do that?

Where can you find information? I might be able to help here, too.

What skills do you have?

10. Supporting practical ideas and actions

So, what do you think you might do today?

When will you do it?

What might you try in the next few days/weeks?

Who else could help you to achieve [your goals]?

On a scale of 0-10, how likely are you to taking this action?

Mindfulness exercises encourage detaching feelings from thoughts. What do you think about that?

Mindful practises

Breathe in for 4secs & out for 6secs. Do this for 1 minute

Yawn & stretch for 10 secs every hour

Say aloud:
"May I be happy,
May I be well,
May I be filled with kindness & peace"

Stroke your hands with your index finger: feel the movement

What is your heart's aspiration?
eg to show loving kindness, calm, patience
Write it down & say it daily

FURTHER READING

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