

OARS: Open Questions

When you pick up your 13-year-old son from school, it's all too easy to ask, *"Did you have a good day?"* This question is unlikely to open up much dialogue and may instead close down the conversation. As an alternative, think about the possibilities opened up by *"How was your day at school?"* or *"Tell me some interesting things that happened today,"* or *"What's the coolest thing you learned?"* For any of you who have interacted with a 13-year-old, you know that these questions still may get you nowhere, but that choice is theirs—it is not dictated by how the question was framed.

Open questions invite people to consider and share their own thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. They tend to elicit diverse and expansive responses. Open questions provide an opportunity for people to better understand themselves, while also helping listeners better understand them.

Closed questions, in contrast, seek facts and data. Closed questions tend to serve the needs of the questioner and can feel interrogative when the questioner asks a series of closed questions one after another.

Closed questions are more like a multiple choice quiz; open questions are more like essay questions. Both have a place in healthcare coaching. However, open questions are considerably more useful in creating a strong relational foundation and facilitating conversations about change.

Open questions do the following:

- Demonstrate genuine interest ("compassionate curiosity")
- Guide, expand, and deepen the conversation
- Invite self-reflection and elaboration
- Affirm the ability to choose

Open questions, by their very nature, set a welcoming, respectful tone. They provide latitude for people to talk about what's most important to them and to respond on their own terms.

Especially when used in combination with skillful reflective statements, open questions provide a vehicle for individuals to develop new perspectives, which in turn can help them to move in the direction of change.

Here are some examples of open questions:

- What would you like me to know about yourself?
- What's going well in your life? What's not going so well?
- What would you like to focus on today in our time together?
- How does mindfulness practice fit into your life, if at all?
- When you do get good sleep, what does it do for you?
- What do you value most about having a healthy diet?
- What are your thoughts about seeing a nutritionist?
- If you were to exercise more regularly, what would be your reasons to do so?
- What specific changes are you thinking about making?
- How can I or others in your life support you in this change?

It is not uncommon for practitioners to ask questions that are technically closed but have an open intention. In such cases, clients often will let us “get away with” asking closed questions and treat them as if they were open-ended. Think of it as a moment of grace! That said, it is worth giving careful attention to how we frame questions. Open questions are much more indicative of the spirit and style of MI than closed ones. For many of us, closed questions are a reflex, and it can be helpful to take the extra step of converting them into open questions before offering them.

Never underestimate the power of a well-placed, well-timed open question. While people might not immediately be sure how to respond, they will often consider and reflect on a thought-provoking question for days, weeks, or months to come. Open questions often plant seeds for future and ongoing discernment.

We utilize open questions, as with the other core MI skills, throughout the four processes of MI. Open questions will take different forms depending on whether you're seeking to engage the person and build rapport, increase understanding of the person's concerns, strengthen collaboration, find a focus, invite exploration, evoke motivation, or elicit and develop a plan for change.

General guidelines in MI include the following:

- Keep questions clear and brief.
- Avoid negating open questions with closed ones (e.g., “*How's your week been? Did you follow your diet?*”).



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- Ask more open questions than closed questions.
- Try to use at least twice as many reflections as open questions.

In using open questions, Miller and Rollnick note that *“a simple rhythm in MI is to ask an open question and then to reflect what the person says, perhaps two reflections per question, like a waltz.”*