

Guidelines for Asking Honest, Open Questions...

... in support of the rule “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no correcting”—and in support of our intention to help each other listen for inner truth...

- An honest, open question is one you cannot possibly ask while thinking, “I know the right answer to this and I sure hope you give it to me...” Thus, “Have you ever thought about seeing a therapist?” is not an honest, open question! But “What did you learn from the experience you just told us about?” is.
- Try not to get ahead of the focus person’s language with your questions. “What did you mean when you said you felt sad?” is an honest, open question. “Didn’t you also feel angry?” is not.
- Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with rationales and background materials that allow you to insert your own opinions or advice.
- Ask questions that go to the person as well as the problem, questions about the inner realities of the situation as well as the outward facts.
- Ask questions aimed at helping the focus person explore his or concern rather than satisfying your own curiosity.
- If you have an intuition that a certain question might be useful, even if it seems a bit “off the wall,” trust it—once you are reasonably certain that it is an honest, open question. E.g., “What color is this issue for you, and why?”
- If you aren’t sure about a particular question, sit with it for a while and wait for clarity.
- As a group, watch the pacing of the questions, allowing some silence between the last answer and the next question. Questions that come too fast may feel aggressive, cutting off the deep reflection that can help the focus person.
- If you have asked one question and heard an answer, you may feel a need to ask a follow-up question. But if you find yourself about to ask the third question in a row before anyone else has had a chance to ask one, don’t!
- Avoid questions with yes-no or right-wrong answers. At the same time, remember that the best questions are often simple and straightforward.

Learning to ask honest, open questions is challenging. We may slip occasionally into old “fixing” habits and need forgiveness, from others and from ourselves. As the old saw goes, “Forgive and remember!” and try not to make that particular mistake again. It helps to continually remind ourselves that our purpose in this exercise is not to show what good problem-solvers we are, but simply to support another person in listening to his or her inner teacher.