



# PSDP—Resources and Tools: Using appreciative questions in supervision

## Introduction

Appreciative questions are very important in creating a safe and containing context in supervision. In addition to focusing on strengths and on what is going well for children and families, appreciative questions bring out the best in people, enabling them to be their best selves.

Appreciative questions change the focus of the worker to considering strengths within the family network, team or organisational system. They are helpful in 'stuck' situations where practitioners feel that they are not able to make progress when working with children and families. They can also be used in team meetings and in organisations to address organisational dilemmas.

Appreciative questions are derived from appreciative inquiry, a systemic approach developed by Cooperrider (Whitney and Cooperrider, 2011; Hammond, 2013; Partridge, forthcoming). In appreciative inquiry the approach flips the context from a problem-saturated stance to an appreciation of strengths and what is going well.

Appreciative inquiry is based on the 'heliotropic principle' that plants grow towards the light. In a similar way, the proposition is that human systems grow in the direction of their inquiry. For this reason, appreciative inquiry focuses on future hopes and dreams to create a vision that the system, family or social worker can grow towards.

Using appreciative questions does not mean that issues of risk are ignored but that, in addressing risk, the system's best efforts to maintain safety are acknowledged and worked with. [The Signs of Safety approach](#) (Turnell and Edwards 1999) is based on this principle.

This learning tool will explain what appreciative questions are and why they are important to use when working with children and families, and in supervision. The tool will also introduce you to three systemic concepts (bifurcation, double listening and the river bank position), which give further insights into why it is important to focus on resilience and strengths in conversations and how this can be achieved.

## The 4D cycle of appreciative inquiry

The 4D cycle (Hammond, 2013; Whitney & Cooperrider 2011), provides a process to engage in applying appreciative inquiry to an issue where you would like to see things improve as it guides your questioning to focus on how to construct better outcomes.

For example, you might choose an example of team functioning, a great supervision session or an important change in a family situation as your affirmative topic.

Figure 1 below shows you the different elements of the 4D cycle.

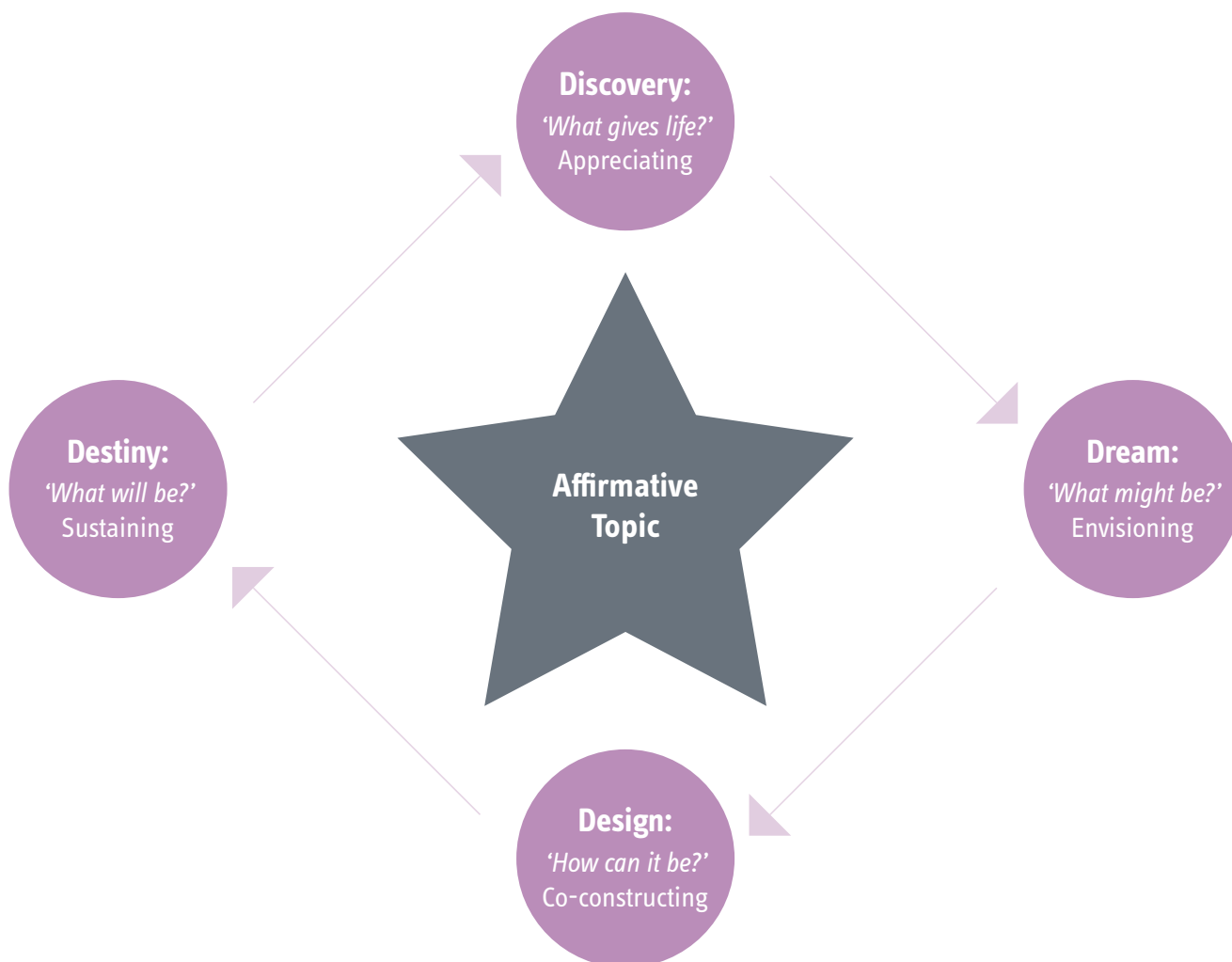


Figure 1: the 4D cycle

If you were to choose to focus on team functioning you might start by **discovery**, asking appreciative questions in detail about what is currently going well, i.e. who is doing what and where?

You could then shift to **dream**, inviting the team to envisage what might be, if everything was even better and these good aspects multiplied. Again, it is important that a real picture of the future dream is developed in detail.

Once the dream is clear you can move towards **design**, how this dream might be co-constructed, and who needs to do what with whom to make it happen.

Finally, **destiny** anticipates what will keep this happening and explores how it will be sustained.

The following questions can help you navigate all four stages of the cycle.

## Questions about the 4D cycle

### Discovery questions might include:

Exactly what happened which makes this a 'sparkling moment'?

What helped to make this happen?

What were the building blocks?

What small steps contributed to this?

Who supported this?

### Dream questions might be:

The miracle question is a dream question, i.e. if you were to wake up tomorrow and everything was just as you hoped it would be, what would be happening?

What sort of future might you be able to imagine if this experience were to continue and grow?

How do you hope things might develop over the next six months / year / five years?

### Destiny (or deliver) questions:

What will sustain this change?

What needs to be done to support this?

What do people of different roles in the family / workforce need to be doing?

What sort of training is needed?

What progress can the family make on this themselves?

### Design questions might be:

What exactly would this look like?

Who would be doing what?

How would workers see themselves?

How would teams develop?

What would families believe?

What values would be embedded in this vision?

## Examples of appreciative questions

Resilience questions:	
How do you think you responded to that challenge?	What abilities did you discover in yourself?
What new discoveries did you make?	Who would know about these hidden abilities?
Who supports these?	What do these abilities say about you as a person?
What in the future will enable these abilities to grow and thrive?	

Aspirations / identity questions:	
What do you like doing? What makes this enjoyable?	What do you want to achieve in your life?
What would make you feel like you are making a contribution?	When now, or in the past, have you felt like you are making a difference?
How did you make this happen?	What makes you feel excited / useful / satisfied? Tell me about a time when you felt these things?

## Confidence or self-awareness building questions:

What are the things in your life that help you keep strong?

What achievements have you made?

How did you make them happen?

What are you most proud of in your life?

What do you find comes easily to you?

What inspires you?

What do you find you learn most easily?

You can access a more extensive list of different appreciative questions to use in supervision, or encourage your supervisees to use when working with families, in a [blog about appreciative inquiry](#) by Aldridge.

## Bifurcation and double listening - paying attention to questions that take you into a positive or negative frame in supervision

The word bifurcation means to divide or split into two parts. In this context, it highlights that a practitioner has a number of choices throughout a conversation to ask questions that move into either a positive or pathological frame (Tomm, 1988; Hornstrup, 2019).

This is illustrated in figure 2 below. Questions in the positive frame explore what works well when adopting a strengths-based and appreciative approach. Questions in the pathological frame focus on factors that contribute to a problem or risk.

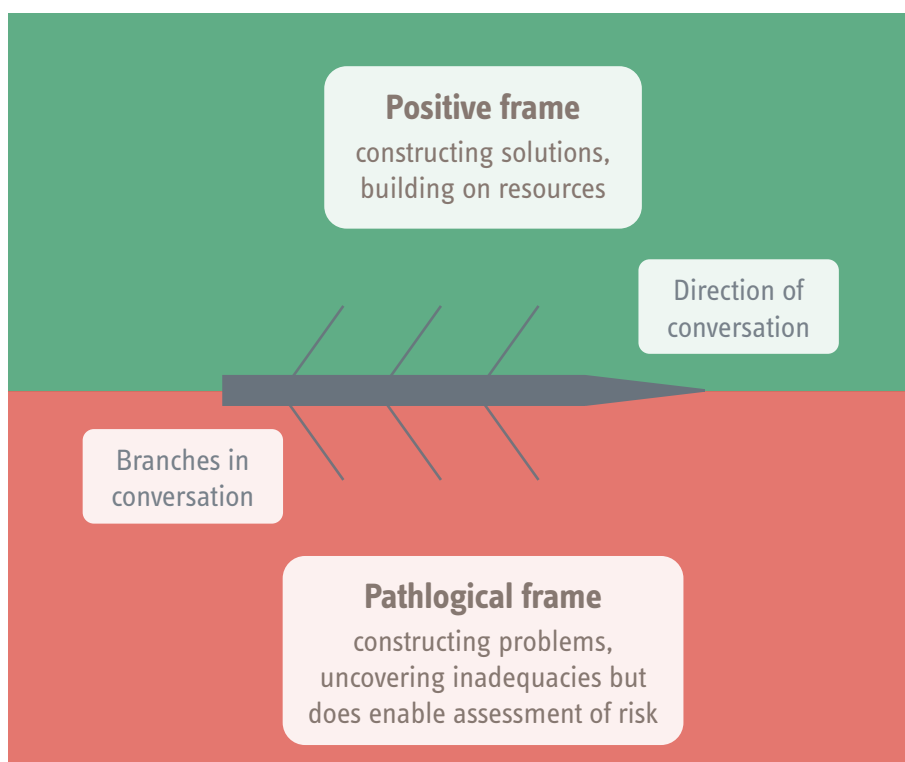


Figure 2: bifurcation



It is, therefore, important that we are aware of bifurcation points throughout conversations where we have a choice to focus on the positive frame or the pathological frame. One way of doing so is to train yourself to engage in a process known as ‘double listening’ (White, 2007). Double listening means simultaneously listening out for both the problem / pathological frame and the positive frame throughout a conversation.

If you practice double listening, you are listening throughout a conversation to make sure that your questions are balanced. You are aiming to strike a balance between an overly-positive approach, which might miss issues of safety and risk and an overly-negative approach, which might miss enhancing a person’s resilience.

This is an important principle for practice supervisors to model in supervision and to discuss with their supervisees, so that they can start to pay attention to it in practice.

## The riverbank position

Having worked with families bereaved by AIDS in South Africa, Ncube (2019) makes the case that it is important to consider if someone is in the ‘riverbank position’ when we are asking about their experiences.

Her argument being that it is no use asking someone what it is like when they are still in the jaws of the crocodile. You need to get them out on the riverbank and into a safe space before you can explore the experience.

These ideas are particularly helpful if we apply them to the concept of double listening.

Have a look at figure 3, which shows the two positions in double listening.

Interviewing into the **effects** frame (red, pathologising) risks re-traumatising practitioners and clients. It is the **‘in the crocodile’s mouth’** position.

Interviewing into the **response** frame is the **‘riverbank’** position (green, positive). From this position, you can ask people about their difficult experiences without danger of re-traumatisation.

Questioning into the response frame will build resilience and enhance identity through inviting people to elaborate their stories of survival, coping and mastery. This is a really important concept, one to ponder and discuss with your team, to think about how it changes the way you ask questions to children and families. This is especially important when practitioners, children and families have had traumatic experiences.

You will see that appreciative questions focus on exploring the ‘riverbank position’.

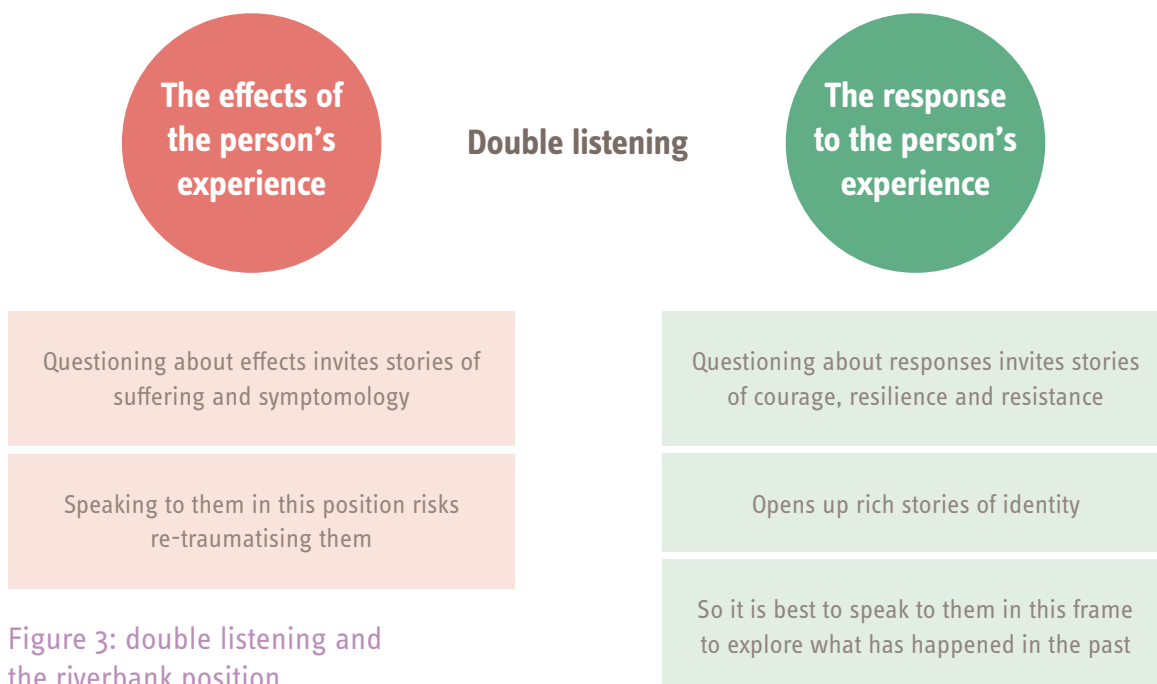


Figure 3: double listening and the riverbank position

## Appreciative questions for personal and professional development

Appreciative questions can also be very helpful in enhancing professional identity and could form part of a team building exercise. For example, you might ask:

Can you think of a time in the last week or two when you felt most near to being the sort of social worker you really want to be?	What were you doing?	Who was there, i.e track the system around this event?	How did you feel?
What did you think about this event?	What did this tell you about yourself?	What did it tell you about your capabilities and your strengths?	What most surprised you?
What hidden abilities did it uncover?	How did these qualities connect with other aspects of yourself that you value?	How would other people in the system respond to these developments?	If you continue to develop these abilities, what sort of professional will you become?
What sort of work will you be likely to be doing in three years' time?	What will it mean to you to be living this kind of professional life?	What other aspects of yourself would you like to be developing?	How will these personal and professional aspects enhance each other?

## Other ways you can use this tool

Talk about the ideas in this tool in a team meeting and invite discussion about appreciative inquiry and the benefits of appreciative questions when working with children and families, and to build teams.

Invite a supervisee to identify a family where they are feeling stuck and use appreciative questions to find new ways of thinking about the family.



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.**

## References


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