Practice Tool

Interventive interviewing

Interventive interviewing helps us think strategically about different kinds of questions we can use in supervision (Tomm, 1987a, 1987b, 1988).

The key idea behind interventive interviewing is that a well-phrased and well-judged question can help supervisees consider new perspectives and possibilities for practice.

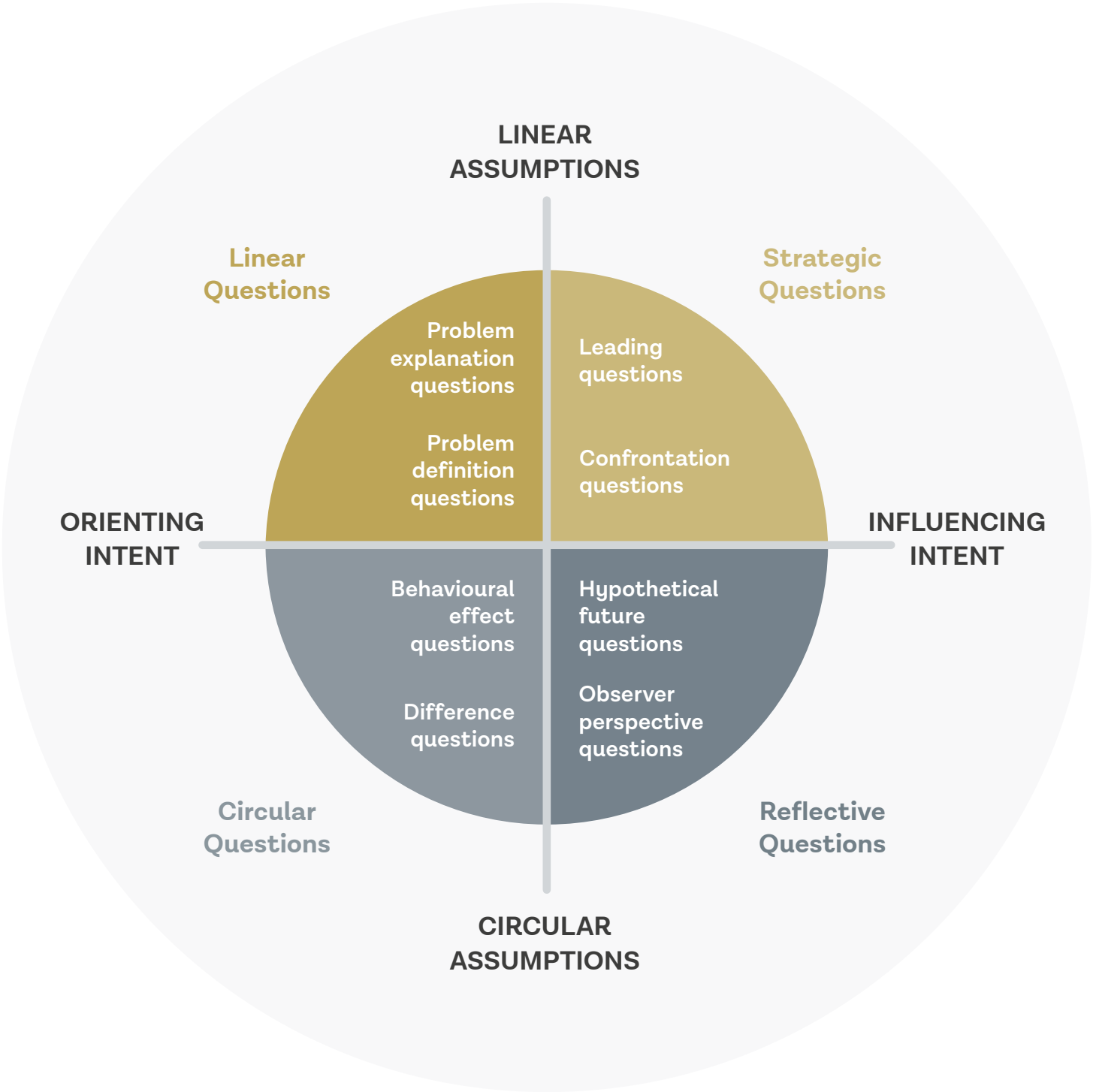
In other words, questions that you ask in supervision can help change thinking about practice.

Watch this film to find out more about what interventive interviewing is.

Let's move on to think in more detail about the kinds of questions you might ask when using interventive interviewing in supervision.

If you look at the image, you can see that two lines split the circle into four sections.

Each section represents a different kind of question.


LINEAR ASSUMPTIONS
Linear Questions
Strategic Questions
Problem explanation questions
Problem definition questions
Leading questions
Confrontation questions
ORIENTING INTENT
INFLUENCING INTENT
Behavioural effect questions
Difference questions
Hypothetical future questions
Observer perspective questions
Circular Questions
Reflective Questions
CIRCULAR ASSUMPTIONS

Linear to circular assumptions

The line that goes from the top to the bottom starts with linear assumptions and moves to circular assumptions.

- **Linear assumptions**: means that we are working with objective facts that we can discover.

- **Circular assumptions**: means that we are looking for meaning, patterns and connections to create new perspectives. There is no right or wrong answer and there are multiple possibilities to consider.

Orienting intent to influencing intent

The line that goes from the left to the right starts with an orienting intent and moves to influencing intent. These lines focus on what the person asking the questions is trying to do.

- **Orienting intent**: the questioner is trying to get a better understanding of the situation and find out what is going on.

- **Influencing intent**: the questioner is focusing on change and helping the other person generate different thoughts or come up with solutions for themselves.

Using interventive interviewing in supervision

Let's now think about the four different kinds of questions that you might ask when using interventive interviewing. You can see these in the middle of the circles in the image.

Linear questions (linear assumptions and orientating intent)

Linear questions are helpful to get an idea of what is happening. They are straightforward, fact-finding questions. They are usually asked at the start of supervision.

These questions can be:

> Problem explanation questions, asking where, when, how a problem is happening.

> Problem definition questions, trying to sort out exactly what the issue of concern is.

In supervision, the supervisor might ask:

What are your biggest challenges in working with this?

What caused you to be concerned about this?

What is XXX's view of their immigration status?

Circular questions (circular assumptions and orientating intent)

Circular questions are usually open questions. They track patterns, difference, and relationships and invite reflection and exploration.

These questions can be:

> Behavioural effect questions, trying to find out how a problem affects people in a system.

> Difference questions, exploring differences between people in a system.

In supervision, the supervisor might ask:

What impact are the parents' arguments having on the child?

Who is most concerned about this?

When you speak to xx and they are angry with you, what do you do?

How does what is happening affect relationships between everyone?

Reflexive questions (circular assumptions, influencing intent)

Reflexive questions focus on generating new perspectives and ideas but with an intent to influence.

Reflexive questions help practitioners to stand back and take an observer perspective of themselves and their practice so that they can generate new ideas and possible solutions (Tomm, 1988, Hieker and Huffington, 2006).

These questions are often the most useful in supervision because, when asked in a facilitative way, they act as a 'probe' or 'stimuli' to think about the situation differently (Tomm, 1988).

There are lots of different kinds of reflexive questions and they can explore anything that you think is relevant to the situation. These are:

Future-orientated questions

Observer perspective questions

Unexpected context-change questions

Embedded suggestion questions

Distinction clarifying questions

Questions introducing hypotheses

Process interruption questions

Future-orientated questions

These push the conversation into the future, to stimulate new options or possibilities. Examples for using these in supervision might be:

Once you catch up with all your recordings in the next three weeks, what will your next focus be?	What does a possible solution look like for you, and is it positive, challenging, and / or attainable?	Whenever I get stuck, I have to sit down and imagine how things might feel in the morning once I've had some distance from it. How do you get distance?
If I [your manager] was to be more supportive of you in the future, what difference would it make to you in achieving your goals?	Imagine that in six months time the situation was completely resolved, what would have needed to have happened to achieve this?	If you were to get more appropriate technological support for your dyslexia, how do you think that would affect your experience of working here?

Observer perspective questions

These invite the supervisee to take a helicopter view of themselves and can create distance from the dilemma they may be posing, which can help to gain a different perspective. Some examples for using these in supervision are:

If your colleague was here what would they say about that?	Imagine that the child/ parent you are working with was here now, what advice might they give you about this dilemma?	Imagine if she were here now, what do you think she would say about how having such an impairment has affected her experience of being a mother?
Who in the team do you admire the most? What do you think they would suggest about how best to catch up with your case notes?	When you and Y are not communicating, how do other team members react? Do they get involved or stay out of it?	

Unexpected context change questions

These flip the context, to invite a different stance. For example, in a conversation about disappointment, asking a question about hope. Examples of how these may be used in supervision are:

What would it be like if you had the opportunity to do X instead of Y?	What would the work environment look like if the conflict went away? What would be different?	If the situation changes, what do you want from the change? Which elements would you want to stay the same?
Who in the team benefits from the conflict the most? Who would experience the most loss if it stopped? What's happening in the team that needs this kind of behaviour?	If the conflict was a solution, what problem is the conflict solving?	

Embedded suggestion questions

These introduce an idea, advice or a suggestion. Examples of ways to use these in supervision are:

What do you think it would be like if you spoke more clearly and made more eye contact when you were speaking to her?	If, instead of complaining to your colleagues, you simply spoke to Y about the impact of her behaviour on your feelings, what would she do?	If you were to tell me you needed three weeks to get your files up to date, what do you think I would say?
What would it be like if you asked him to show you what it is like, as a young black person, to live in this town?	If you were to tell me you needed three weeks to get your files up to date, what do you think I would say? Instead of thinking your ASYE / student is willfully behaving this way, you think she's just confused and doesn't understand what you want - how do you imagine you might explore this with her?	

Distinction clarifying questions

These gather a bit more detail, sort out differences between people and perspectives and separate out the components of the issue. Some examples for supervision are:

When two of your colleagues are both saying the same thing, but their emphasis is slightly different, whose opinion do you value the most?	Who do you think is most excited about the new changes in the team? What do you think about the colleagues who are embracing them?	What do you do when priorities change quickly? In the team, whose style do you think is more adaptive to change and what can be learnt from their approach?
What is most important to you - e.g. being successful in your career or having a family life?	It sounds like the child's class teacher and the head of year have a different understanding of her access needs. Whose perspective are you most in tune with?	

Questions introducing hypotheses

These give a glimpse of your thinking and some possible ideas about a situation, without creating pressure for your supervisee to have to agree. Examples of these for supervision are:

If you were to think that the professional system is mirroring the family system and vice versa, what might you do differently?	I'm wondering whether you didn't say anything about feeling overwhelmed with work because you are worried that people will think you can't cope. What are your thoughts about that?
When the parents don't cooperate and are not following the plan and then start blaming you, I'm wondering if you are feeling stuck and frustrated, which then makes you more critical of your own practice / more likely to get frustrated with others.	I'm wondering, if you were to facilitate a conversation with the family about the parents' experiences of coming to this country, and how it affected their feelings about the children, would it help them, and possibly you, to better understand their point of view?

Process interruption questions

These can be used to jump in when things get tricky and might be used to remark on the immediate process of the conversation in order to create a shift. Some examples of how these may be used in supervision are:

How much longer can you go on like this?	I can see that you are frustrated, disappointed and don't see the point. How do you manage to be productive when you normally feel like this?
When you feel as bad as you do now but you're at home, what do you do?	You're thinking discriminatory behaviour is happening here? How have you successfully challenged discrimination in the past?

Strategic questions (linear assumptions, influencing intent)

Strategic questions often embed advice designed to influence the other person.

They are useful in challenging different perspectives and positions but should be used sparingly (and with respect for the power imbalance between you and a supervisee)

These questions can be:

> Leading questions which suggest a certain line of enquiry or hypothesis.

> Confrontation questions which challenge thinking.

In supervision, the supervisor might ask:

Are you worried about the impact that a child protection plan will have on the mother's mental health?	Do you find it difficult to like XXX?	Have you considered that homophobia might be influencing the way that carers talk about this person?	What has stopped you so far from talking to your colleague about your conflict with them?

References

Tomm, K. (1987a). Interventive interviewing: Part 1. Strategizing as a fourth guideline for a therapist. *Family Process*, 26(1), 13-31.

Tomm, K.(1987b). Interventive interviewing: Part 11. Reflexive questioning as a means to enable self-healing. *Family Process*, 26(2), 167-183.

Tomm, K. (1988). Interventive interviewing: Part 111. Intending to ask lineal, circular strategic and reflexive questions? *Family Process*, 27(1), 1-15.

This tool was originally developed as part of the Practice Supervisor Development Programme (2018-2022) funded by the Department for Education.

Author: Usiskin Cohen, McNamara, and Williams