

Helping Clients Arrive: A Therapist's Guide to Opening the Therapy Hour

The Goal

The opening moments of therapy are not simply about gathering updates. They are an opportunity to help clients transition from reporting on life to experiencing it. Rather than asking yourself, *"What should we talk about today?"* consider asking, *"How can I help this client arrive?"*

Remember, these questions are not scripts to memorize. They are invitations. Choose the ones that feel authentic to your therapeutic style, the client sitting across from you, and the work unfolding between you.

Helping Clients Arrive

Use these questions to gently transition clients into the session.

- Where would you like to begin today?
 - What's been taking up the most space for you lately?
 - What's been on your mind since we last met?
 - What feels most present for you today?
 - What feels important for us to spend time with today?
 - As you were driving here, what were you hoping we'd talk about?
 - What's been following you around this week?
 - What keeps pulling at your attention?
 - What have you found yourself thinking about lately?
 - What feels most alive for you right now?
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Moving Beyond the Weekly Report

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Help clients move from a chronological recap to meaningful reflection.

- Rather than walking me through your whole week, what's one moment that stands out?
 - If we paused one scene from this week and looked at it together, which one would you choose?
 - Was there a moment that stayed with you longer than you expected?
 - What surprised you about yourself this week?
 - What caught your attention?
 - When did you notice yourself reacting more strongly than you expected?
 - What has lingered with you?
 - What's been harder to let go of than you expected?
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Inviting Emotional Awareness

Help clients move from events into emotional experience.

- What has felt the heaviest lately?
 - What emotion has been showing up the most?
 - What has been hardest to shake?
 - What has your heart been carrying?
 - What has felt emotionally different since we last met?
 - When did you feel most like yourself this week?
 - When did you feel least like yourself?
 - What has been sitting quietly in the background?
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Inviting the Body Into the Conversation

Bring awareness to the nervous system and embodied experience.

- Before we jump in, what are you noticing in your body right now?
 - As you settle into the chair, what do you notice?
 - How has your body been letting you know what kind of week you've had?
 - Where has stress been showing up physically?
 - Has your body been trying to get your attention about anything?
 - If your body had a voice today, what might it say?
 - What has your nervous system been asking for?
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Inviting Reflection & Meaning

Shift the conversation from what happened to what it meant.

- What have you been trying to make sense of?
 - What has stayed with you?
 - Has anything been lingering that you haven't been able to shake?
 - What have you been noticing about yourself lately?
 - Has anything shifted since we last met?
 - What's been feeling different, even if you can't quite explain why?
 - What do you find yourself returning to again and again?
 - What feels like it's asking for your attention?
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When Clients Say, “I Don’t Know What to Talk About.”

Resist the urge to rescue the moment. Stay curious.

- That's okay. We don't have to know yet. Let's get curious together.
 - If we didn't have to find the “right” topic, where might we begin?
 - What's the first thing that comes to mind, even if it seems unrelated?
 - What made you decide to keep today's appointment?
 - If we sat quietly for another minute, what do you imagine might come up?
 - What have you found yourself thinking about when nobody else is around?
 - Is there anything you've almost brought up before but talked yourself out of mentioning?
 - If your week could tap you on the shoulder right now, what do you think it would want you to notice?
 - What feels hardest to put into words today?
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Noticing Growth

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Therapy isn't only about pain. Growth leaves clues, too.

- What are you quietly proud of?
 - What felt even a little easier?
 - Where did you surprise yourself?
 - Did anything happen this week that the “old you” might have handled differently?
 - What strength did you notice yourself relying on?
 - What felt like progress, even if it seemed small?
 - What are you beginning to trust about yourself?
 - Where did you notice yourself responding instead of reacting?
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Following the Thread

Once something meaningful begins to emerge, slow down.

- Tell me more about that.
 - What was happening inside you in that moment?
 - What made that moment stand out?
 - What do you think made that hit so hard?
 - Can we stay with that for a minute?
 - What happened just then?
 - I noticed you paused before answering. What was happening for you?
 - You smiled when you said that. I'm curious about that.
 - You mentioned that almost in passing. Can we go back to it?
 - You said, “It's probably not a big deal.” I'm wondering about that.
 - What feels important about this?
 - What does this remind you of?
 - Where else has this feeling shown up in your life?
 - Have we seen this pattern before?
 - If this experience had something to teach us, what might it be pointing toward?
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Gentle Reminders for Therapists

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- You don't need to find the session. Your client has already brought it.
- Curiosity is often more powerful than cleverness.
- The first question shapes where attention lands.
- Chronology and significance are not the same thing.
- "I don't know" is often valuable clinical information.
- Small moments frequently lead to the deepest conversations.
- Your presence matters more than the perfect opening question.
- Help clients notice themselves before asking them to explain themselves.

The goal isn't to ask a better question. The goal is to help your client arrive.

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