

# **Holding the Space Sessions**

## A modified version of the Clearness Committee

### **Script for sessions with newcomers**

Let's begin by introducing ourselves to each other by saying our names and where we are located.

We come together to hold the space for each other in a way that provides greater access to our inner resources and wisdom. We will be using a structure that involves taking turns being the focus person, while others ask honest, open questions that can help the focus person find their own answers. This structure that we are using is from the Clearness Committee, and we're using it in a format that allows multiple people to take turns being the focus person all within one hour, instead of just one person being the focus person for two hours.

The following excerpts from Parker Palmer's description of the Clearness Committee give a sense for how we will be holding the space for one another:

Many of us face a dilemma when trying to deal with a personal problem, question, or decision. On the one hand, we know that the issue is ours alone to resolve and that we have the inner resources to resolve it, but access to our own resources is often blocked by layers of inner "stuff"—confusion, habitual thinking, fear, despair. On the other hand, we know that friends might help us uncover our inner resources and find our way, but by exposing our problem to others, we run the risk of being invaded and overwhelmed by their assumptions, judgments, and advice—a common and alienating experience.

Behind the Clearness Committee is a simple but crucial conviction: *each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems.* But that inner voice is often garbled by various kinds of inward and outward interference. The function of the Clearness Committee is not to give advice or “fix” people from the outside in but rather to help people remove the interference so that they can discover their own wisdom from the inside out. Nothing is allowed except real questions, honest and open questions, questions that will help the focus person remove the blocks to their inner truth without becoming burdened by the personal agendas of committee members.

### **Guidelines for asking questions**

Questions will be offered in writing to the focus person using the chat, so the focus person is the only one doing any speaking. Give the focus person a couple of minutes to introduce their topic before starting to offer questions. We encourage the focus person to do whatever is most helpful in choosing when to look at newly offered questions and which questions to answer during the session. Questions can be saved, so they may provide benefit even if they are not answered during the session.

This script is available online at: [teddybeartalksupport.com/htss](http://teddybeartalksupport.com/htss)

Please make every effort to only ask honest, open questions. Please take two minutes to look over the sheet of examples. *(Share your screen to display the document that can be found at <https://teddybeartalksupport.com/examples>. Alternatively, direct people to find it on their own on the 2nd to last page of this document. Pause to give time for looking over the examples.)*

Ask questions for the purpose of helping the focus person rather than for satisfying your own curiosity. These questions are usually brief and have no preamble or explanation.

Such questioning may sound easy. But it can be difficult to frame questions that do not impose what you think on the speaker. This includes questions that are suggestions, advice, or analysis in disguise. It is a rare gift to be given a place where there is no danger of having someone else's agenda imposed on you. Usually, this goes on all the time. That's what we're used to. But, here we're asking you to try not to do any reassuring, diagnosing, providing any logical arguments, or evaluating, be it positive or negative. By doing so, we can create space for the focus person to work through their own agenda.

The focus person always has the right to choose not to answer a question. If you are the focus person, please do not hesitate to exercise this right. You do not need to provide any explanation for why you have chosen not to answer the question.

Note that learning to ask honest, open questions is a skill that these sessions can help us develop. So, we are also holding the space for being patient and compassionate with ourselves as we experiment with coming up with honest, open questions. Questions fall on a continuum, and we'll practice leaning as much as possible towards the open and honest end of the continuum with our questions. We'll be looking for ones that Parker Palmer describes as questions that allow us to "hear each other into speech, into deeper and deeper speech."

### **Guidelines for holding the space**

These sessions can help us to develop our capacities to deeply listen. Here is a piece that speaks to that by David Castro about how he experienced doing an exercise where you listen quietly for 8 minutes as someone tells you their life story.

When my partner started to tell his story, I wanted to ask a truckload of questions directing the conversation. I wanted to follow up on particular details, ask about things he hadn't mentioned, shortcut certain areas and learn more about others that interested me, like someone fast forwarding through a TV show.

After about three minutes, however, something remarkable happened. That incessant voice in my head began to quiet, and for the first time I began to listen at a deeper level. I observed my partner's body language, soaked in his selected words and stopped trying to control the conversation flow. In the remaining five minutes, I learned something profound about the person speaking. I began to see and understand him for the first time. I was actually listening to him instead of focusing on my bundle of projections about him.

## **Taking turns**

We will take turns being the focus person. A timer will be used to keep track of time.

After you hear the timer signaling the end of your turn, feel free to take a few moments to wrap up.

While others are taking their turns being the focus person, our job is to bear silent witness to their self-discovery.

When our session is over, please do not approach one another with unsolicited comments or suggestions. A key point of these sessions is to be a place where we offer the support of listening and questioning without commenting or suggesting.

## **Guidelines for being the focus person**

When you are the focus person, please do not refer to what anyone else has shared. We ask that you do not respond to what others have discussed when it is your turn to be the focus person. This includes giving feedback or advice, making “you” and “we” statements, and mentioning other participants within your turn. Instead, we ask that you keep the focus on yourself.

What is shared in these sessions is to be kept confidential so that we can give each other the freedom to explore any ideas that we want to. Don't worry if your topic is very different from the topics that others have discussed.

*(For a 60-minute session with 2 people)*

Each person will have 23 minutes for their turn.

*(For a 60-minute session with 3 people)*

Each person will have 15 minutes for their turn.

*(For a 60-minute session with 4 people)*

Each person will have 11 minutes for their turn.

*(For a 60-minute session with 5 people)*

Each person will have 9 minutes for their turn.

*(If there are more than 5 people, break into smaller groups of 2, 3, 4, or 5 people.)*

*(Set a timer for each person's turn.)*

## **Closing**

It is time to end our session. We have had the privilege of witnessing each other's process through the windows into each other's worlds that we have been provided. Thank you for holding this space with each other with care.

## **Guidelines for asking honest, open questions**

Note that there are no hard and fast rules for coming up with honest, open questions. Questions fall on a continuum, and we're just asking that you try as much as possible to lean towards the open and honest end of the continuum.

### **Honest, open questions**

A good description of an honest, open question is that the person asking the question could not possibly anticipate the answer to it. These questions are usually brief and have no preamble or explanation. Ask questions for the purpose of helping the focus person rather than for satisfying your own curiosity.

#### **Examples**

What did you mean when you said X?

What next steps might you take?

What would you say to someone in your shoes?

How would you summarize this?

Why's that?

What is an example of Y?

Could you say more about Z?

### **Questions to avoid**

Avoid questions that impose what you think on the speaker. This includes questions that include suggestions, advice, or analysis. We're asking you to avoid doing any evaluating, be it positive or negative, reassuring, diagnosing, judging, labeling, moralizing or providing any logical arguments. It can be surprisingly difficult to keep these out of your questions. A sure sign that a question was not honest and open is if the speaker answers it by saying "Yeah, but..."

#### **Examples**

You mentioned A, which made me think of B, and so I'd like to ask you about C.

Have you tried Y?

Why don't you Z?

Have you read such-and-such book?

Have you thought about talking to so-and-so about this?

This page is from a compassionate listening training packet from:

[https://sherrymccreedy.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/8/9/13896697/compassionate\\_listening-training-packet-intro2.pdf](https://sherrymccreedy.weebly.com/uploads/1/3/8/9/13896697/compassionate_listening-training-packet-intro2.pdf)

### Some Examples:

- Can you say more?
- How has this situation affected your life?
- What was that like for you?
- What is the source of your courage?
- What life experiences have helped you in this situation?
- Could you say more about that?
- If this situation were fully resolved, how would things be better for you?
- How has your life been shaped by these events?
- Can you tell us about the situation that concerns you?
- Disputes often reach the levels they do because of deep, unmet needs. What deep, unmet needs do you see at work in this situation?
- What is in your heart right now? If you were a wise fly on the wall, what do you think might work?
- Can you tell us what life experiences led you to feel this way?
- What are you yearning for?
- What do you most cherish about this relationship?

### Characteristics of Deepening Questions:<sup>2</sup>

- **Create motion** – instead of “Why don’t you move to Seattle?” DQ: “What type of place would you like to move to” or “What is the meaning of this move in your life?”
- **Open up options** – instead of “Why don’t you move to Seattle”, DQ: “What are some places that you feel a connection to”
- **Evoke ultimate concerns, high points and deepest values** -
- **Avoid “why”** - why questions create defense and resistance. “How”, “What” and “Is” are good places to start instead. Why don’t you find a way to help the community on this issue?” vs. “What action might you take to help the community on this issue?”
- **Are empowering** - “What would you like to do to help your community?” (for example to high school kids) Assume that they want to help. Assume the goodness in people
- **Ask the unaskable** - “Are there any ways that you might be contributing to this conflict?” “What are you both prepared to do for the sake of your grandchildren?”
- **Are simple.** Asking more than one question at a time is confusing...keep your questions simple and one at a time.
- **Are respectful.** When we use inquiry we convey trust in the person that they are smart enough, courageous enough, to find their own solutions. This is change from the inside out.

**Remember...Inquiry is often not needed:** Take your cue from the speaker and stay out of the way as much as you can. Most often, Less is More. For the most part Compassionate Listening is practiced by offering loving presence, heartfelt connection and spaciousness. Questions are needed much less often than we tend to imagine. We are often silent, fully present while holding space for the speaker, perhaps offering a touch. We may offer a reflective response (facts-feelings-values/qualities). Most essentially, we anchor in the heart.

<sup>2</sup> In part synthesized from Fran Peavey, **Strategic Questioning: An Experiment in Communication of the Second Kind.** Available from [crabgrass@igc.org](mailto:crabgrass@igc.org)

Examples from *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal* by Parker J. Palmer & Arthur Zajonc, with Megan Scribner

- What experience shaped the idea you just told us about?
- You said that your students are resistant to this approach. What are the marks of that resistance, and what do you think causes it?
- You mentioned you find the work of such-and-such a writer helpful. What is that work, and why is it meaningful to you?

These questions come from genuine curiosity and authentic inquiry ... They do not put the speaker on the defensive. They do not attempt to compel the speaker to go in a particular direction. They allow the speaker to define his or her truth for himself or herself.