



**COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES**  
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**SOCRATIC QUESTIONING**

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Definition: Socratic questioning involves asking strategic questions to understand clients' perspectives and help them work out solutions to their problems.

Elements: In Socratic questioning the therapist tries to open therapeutic opportunities e.g. *"When you're depressed you seem to believe your negative thoughts rather uncritically. Are your negative thoughts always correct? Might some be unrealistically negative? Could positive thoughts be even more accurate? Perhaps we could explore how accurate your thinking is?"* This Socratic style differs from direct instruction such as "Depressed people see things too blackly; your thinking needs to become more accurate".

Further examples of Socratic questioning aiding assessment of clients' problems and ways of dealing with those, and leading clients to develop successful strategies are: *"When a stressful situation occurs, do you always get depressed? Could one see that situation in other ways in order to feel better?"*; *"When you get angry with your partner, what does that say about your overall relationship?"*; *"Does getting anxious mean you never cope with problems?"*

At times a direct non-Socratic style is also called for e.g.: when gathering information during initial assessment ("What signs of depression do you notice?"); in a suicidal crisis demanding quick action; telling clients about social services or how therapy might unfold; teaching assertiveness skills by role play in sessions; answering clients' requests for expert knowledge or advice about dilemmas.

Related procedures: Therapeutic alliance; validation of feelings.

Application: Can be used with individual clients and in group settings.

1<sup>st</sup> use? Beck et al (1979)

References:

1. Beck AT, Rush, AJ, Shaw, BF, Emery, G (1979). *Cognitive therapy for depression*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
2. Carey TA, Mullan RJ (2004). What is Socratic questioning?, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 41: 217-226.
3. Castonguay LF, Beutler LE (2006). *Principles of therapeutic changes that work*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
4. Dobson DJA, Dobson KS (2009). *Evidence-based practice of cognitive-behavioral therapy*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Case Illustration: (Dobson unpublished)

Mia (has procrastinated asking her parents to repay money she loaned them): It would be good if I just did it. *Therapist*: What would be good about it? Mia: We'd not have this awkward issue between us. *Th*: Further advantages? Mia: I might get the money back, and use it. *Th*: To buy? Mia: A new refrigerator - ours hasn't worked well recently. *Th*: Any 'pluses' for your parents? Mia: Maybe they find it embarrassing to owe me money, and would be relieved to get this over with. *Th*: Quite

*a few advantages. What about risks, downsides?* Mia: My parents have money - it wasn't much, and they inherited money recently. Mostly, I fear it'll be awkward. *Th: For you? them? both?* Mia: Both. But mostly I'm embarrassed to ask. *Th: Your embarrassment is in the way? Perhaps you fear what might happen?* Mia: They might be embarrassed or resent me. *Th: What's the worst that might happen?* Mia: My mom might cry. My dad might say something hurtful, that I'm cheap or forcing them to pay too soon. *Th: Pretty powerful fears! What's the best possible outcome?* Mia: They pay me and we all forget about this. *Th: This is the best? Might you see something even more positive: that you helped your parents when needed and now they can repay you? Could such support strengthen your relationship?* Mia: I never thought of it that way. I didn't think my parents would. *Th: So what's the mostly likely outcome?* Mia: Mostly likely, they'll pay me. I'll feel awkward but relieved to get it and buy a new refrigerator. *Th: Or maybe they won't have the money, or have it but want to keep it for other purposes. But at least you can talk about that openly. On balance, do you think it's worth the risk?* Mia: Yes, I think so, but I'll be nervous. *Th: That's part of your prediction. Would it help to plan your making this request, and when?* Mia: I think I'm ready. [Mia and the therapist role play her requesting the money and a date and time to meet. She's also asked to predict what will happen, how she'll feel, and her parents' reaction, for comparison with the actual outcomes at the next session. Finally, Mia is encouraged to recognize her goal is to make the effort, and the outcome is uncertain.]