

TINY QUESTIONS:

How to Inspire Experience-Near and Resonant Tellings in Therapeutic Conversations

Lyra Barrera, Psy.D.

This writing is intended to be a companion piece to a video created for the Meet The Author series event on July 15, 2024 hosted by the Dulwich Centre Foundation, the University of Melbourne, and Evanston Family Therapy Center (USA). Please do not share or copy this draft.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most compelling aspects of Narrative Therapy for me is its insistence on giving voice to marginalized ideas, knowledges, and experiences. One way to honor that intention and bring those knowledges forward is by asking tiny questions -- questions about the details of people's lives.

We believe that it is a political act to engage in conversation with someone about their life -- the way we hear, the things we say, and the questions we ask all have effects. From this perspective, if a person describes their life in a general or broad way, and we respond by stopping our inquiry and settling on this broad account, we run the risk of reducing their experience to a pre-made/pre-existing standard that was not created by them, their family, or their community.

From a narrative way of thinking, every utterance of ours is an opportunity to get closer and closer to a telling of the person's life that is exquisitely specific to their lived experience -- a telling that *in its detail* activates nuance and possibility that can be noticed, seen, and known by only the person telling it. It is through our pursuit of specificity that we co-create meaning that is truly liberating.

The following is intended to be a primer of sorts, offering an overview of ethical assumptions as well as an orienting framework for the therapeutic practice of Tiny Questions. In the sections that follow, I name preconditions for the use of Tiny Questions, the therapeutic context in which this work resides, and some caveats for practitioners to hold in mind. I then list the tenets of Narrative Therapy that inspire the use of Tiny Questions and some points of entry into detailed accounts of experience. I then outline five categories of questions that honor and facilitate experience-near tellings, providing examples that can be used to pursue and develop specificity in therapeutic conversations. Finally, I offer a few questions for reflection and overarching take-aways.¹

Preconditions

As we establish, grow, and maintain therapeutic conversations, we start with being relationally present and holding unconditional positive regard for the person consulting us. Bringing a respect-full and honoring quality to the relationship is essential to an environment where resonant meaning can be co-created. We aspire to hold a kind of therapeutic presence that includes openness, groundedness, expansiveness, immersion, and an orientation of being with and for the other (Geller, 2017a).

¹ The people whose theories and practices are foundational to my work include: Michael White, David Epston, Karl Tomm, Sallyann Roth, Jill Freedman, Gene Combs, Johnella Bird, William Madsen, Allen Wade, Larry Zucker, and Nancy Steiny.

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Therapeutic Context

This kind of therapy work is not evaluative, diagnostic, or prescriptive. It is very specifically an undertaking of collaborative *meaning-making*. To that end, in these therapeutic conversations, people's experiences are held:

- in CONTEXT – We are not after objective truths but subjective experience.
- within COMMUNITY – Meaning is agreed-upon and circulated by others.
- via LANGUAGE – We engage thoughtful and purposeful questions to co-create meaning.

Caveats

- 1) **Tiny questions are not meant to be interrogating, probative, or suggesting that the person's telling is insufficient.** Therefore, it is essential that they are asked with a tone of genuine curiosity and care, and asked in service of the person's bigger goals.

To create a framework for this conversational ethic, my structured initial session includes a statement from me that is intended to flatten the hierarchy between therapist and client, and articulate the importance of *co-constructing* a useful conversation. The exact language I use is spelled out in the companion video (around the 23:00 mark).

- 2) **Tiny questions are not the starting point.** Untethered details can replicate people's experiences of anxiety and overwhelm, and can muddy the waters of naming larger goals. If someone's telling starts with an abundance of details, it is critical that we back up, invite them to put a headline on their detailed account, and *from there* proceed with our curiosity, generating questions that are anchored to their dreamed-of life.
- 3) **Tiny questions are not reserved for unique outcomes.** Tiny Questions are engaged within the broader framework of double listening. They are intended to be a relational practice of deep curiosity toward the particularities of people's agency that exists and evolves in the midst of, alongside, and in spite of the difficulties that they face. We get and stay curious about the person's experience of what is dreamed-of, what is problematic, and what is preferred. Resonant accounts of all three of these is what we are after.
- 4) **Tiny questions are not the end point of a predetermined linear sequence but exist within a larger framework.** In the companion video, there are many references to the ways that questions diminish in size, from Big to Tiny. These are meant as descriptors of the scope of the inquiry, not as steps to be taken one after the other. The five categories of questions outlined in the writing below provide a larger framework/an orienting map for this therapeutic practice.

TENETS OF NARRATIVE THERAPY

Three foundational ideas in Narrative Therapy indicate the usefulness and importance of Tiny Questions:

- 1) Identity is constituted, made up of the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories others tell about us.

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2) Clients are the experts on their experiences. Narrative Therapy privileges local knowledge.

3) Narrative Therapy is committed to the therapeutic process of people reclaiming authorship of their own stories. Therefore, it insists on our staying close to and using client's language.

And so it follows that being guided by and using Tiny Questions becomes a way to practice the core ethics of Narrative work by pursuing and developing specificity in therapeutic conversation.

Additionally, while the pursuit of specificity can be utilized across many contexts and therapy models, my own therapy work hews to Michael White's Statement of Position Map (White, 2007) as one of its orienting frameworks. On that map, the four categories of inquiry are:

- (1) Negotiating a Particular, Experience-Near Definition of the Problem
- (2) Mapping the Effects of the Problem
- (3) Evaluating the Effects of the Problem's Activities
- (4) Justifying the Evaluation

(White, 2007, pp. 38-59)

I am holding these categories in mind as I move through therapeutic conversations with people, always mindful about where we are on the map. (Please refer to the source material for the explication of these categories; it is beyond the limits of this writing to review them in detail.)

TINY QUESTIONS IN PRACTICE

Starting points

People consult with us for therapy for myriad reasons, but generally speaking, we are talking because they are experiencing some degree of suffering. It may be that their life is not lining up with their intentions, values, and commitments. It may be that they have lost sight of their dreams for themselves. As we are listening to people's accounts, we have our eye on their dreamed-of life all the time – helping put language to it, holding onto it, and refining it in an ongoing way – and we regard these details as their goals. We are also listening for the challenges they are up against and the ways they are contending with and meeting those challenges. **Double listening** refers to the way we keep track of both the dreamed-of and the up-against as we co-create experience-near tellings.

Points of Entry

As we listen to a person's story, what we attend to and what we ignore are guided by our theoretical model. The companion video provides a light-hearted example of this process of discernment.

"Points of entry" are openings in a person's telling; they are the things we pay attention to and then engage in order to move toward an experience-near account.

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Broadly, as narrative therapists, we are listening for what people care about (i.e., their intentions, values, and commitments) and what they are doing (i.e., their agency) as it relates to what they care about. We are particularly interested in the specificity of what they are hoping for/their dreamed-of life, what supports them in their pursuit of those hopes and dreams, and the constraints or what gets in the way of that dreamed-of life. Some openings are readily visible, while others can be smaller and trickier to see.

As people tell their stories, you will hear that **an action was taken** (e.g., something happened) or **a decision was made** (e.g., something changed). Oftentimes people have become separated from their own agency and so in their tellings, they may not say explicitly that they *took* an action or *made* a decision. Therefore, while these points of entry can be easily visible, they may require listening for and eliciting how the person initiated or directed their actions; this can be a place to begin to amplify agency.

Examples that, at first glance, seem to be absent any *action taken* or *decision made*: “I was at my neighbor’s house.” “I just watched TV all night.” “I didn’t answer the phone.” But within each of these accounts, some thing is happening while other things are not. All three involve decisions being made and actions being taken. Asking a question like “Oh, how did you decide on that?” can invite not only people’s agency, but also the values, intentions, and commitments informing their decisions.

Another subtle point of entry to a *decision made* is when you hear pre-made self-descriptions or labels. These can include popular psychology terms or diagnoses (e.g., from a medical professional or from social media), or identity conclusions like “I’m good at that.” Asking “Could you say how you came to that?” or “What about that resonates for you?” creates opportunities in each of these instances for people to connect to their actual lived experiences and name the ways their values, commitments, and intentions may or may not line up with these labels.

One final possible point of entry is a **change in the person’s affect** (i.e., their facial expression, tone of voice, body tension, or energy). These nonverbal changes can be indications of an experience-near telling or resonance. These shifts are not to be remarked upon by us, as they would be in Gestalt or some somatic therapies. We simply hold them as markers of sites for possible further respectful inquiry.

We are on the lookout for points of entry to details that amplify agency, movement, and change while anchoring to people’s values, commitments, and intentions.

Five Categories of Questions

As I listen to people’s stories, I tend to be painting a picture in my mind, making a movie and filling in pieces as I go. The visualizing I do allows me to be holding many aspects of their experiences at once, including noticing the unattended or underdeveloped parts of their accounts.

I ask the following kinds of questions as this movie is developing, checking in often with the person about the closeness of my understanding to their experience (asking versions of “Better here? Better here?”) and doing summaries throughout.

These categories of questions are anchored to philosophical and ethical stances of narrative/postmodern work and hold that: local/client knowledge is to be privileged, meaning-making is contextual, experiences exist on a continuum, possibilities are created through relational understandings, and the act of bringing forward the specificity of people’s experience is honoring and transformative.

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It is vitally important that as you move through this process, you are:

- 1) keeping the person's goals in mind (Wandering down paths of inquiry that are unrelated to what people are hoping for will yield very rich tellings of extraneous and unimportant details.)
- 2) engaging in double listening, and
- 3) paying particular attention to values, commitments, intentions, and agency

(Please note that the questions in each category below are offered as examples and not meant to be an exhaustive list.)

Though these categories are not necessarily sequential, the first category is an important place to start.

- 1) **PRIORITY IN THE MOMENT:** What to prioritize is client-driven and in service of their goals.
 - A. Priority question** – “Of all those things you just named [list topics they have mentioned thus far], which of them feels like the one you'd want to attend to in this moment? Or something else?” This ensures that we are starting with what is important to the person. “Or something else” leaves room for topics that may be a priority but have not yet been named.
 - B. Big deal/medium deal/small deal** – Ask a person to rate the level of importance of their stated problem or the significance of a unique outcome. “Was that a big deal? Medium deal? Small deal?” This anchors to their values and intentions and guards against us being guided by our own biases. We then proceed accordingly.
 - C. Instead** – “What do you wish was happening instead?” Brings forward the absent but implicit, helping to clarify goals.

Once the priority for the conversation has been established, engage what you are hearing:

- 2) **PUT IT IN CONTEXT:** Meaning-making is contextual.
 - A. Time**
 - i. “Walk me through it.” Refer to the companion video at around the 15:00 mark for a demonstration of this. This is meant to expand time. Invite the person to describe the movie of what happened, slowing way down to get more details (e.g., what were the first steps, next steps, who/what was supporting you through it, etc.).
 1. Listen for agency
 2. Check against goals/preferences
 3. Make distinctions between the problematic and the preferred
 4. Check in about unique outcomes
 5. Listen for emotions associated with the view of the event vs. just events that took place (Wade)
 - ii. Situate the experience as occurring in/at a specific time. Positions are not fixed, but are nuanced and held differently in different moments. Ask for time-based context.

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- B. Factors** – When someone is making or has made a decision. “What were the factors at play in this process? How did you consider or weigh those factors?” Brings forward contextual and cultural influences as well as values.
- C. “According to whom/what?”** – Activate curiosity around taken-for-granted positions to start to name the influence of operating cultural discourses.
- D. “In what way?”** – A very helpful question to expand a telling. (e.g., I’ve really grown to care about my job. OR I find him to be annoying.)
- E. Images** (literal or metaphoric) – “Is there an image that comes to mind when you think about what you’re imagining/hoping for/struggling with?” Conjuring an image can provide paths into details.

3) **PLACE IT ON A CONTINUUM:** Experiences are on a continuum/not binary.

A. Distinctions – “What was different this time?” “*In what ways* was this different from other times?”

- i. These questions rest on the assumptions that:
 - 1. two events/experiences can never be exactly the same
 - 2. experiences are on a continuum/not binary
 - 3. previously overlooked details can be meaningful and liberating when brought forward and named
- ii. These questions allow for the noticing and naming of:
 - 1. experiences of change
 - 2. gradients of movement
 - 3. contextual factors that provide support or apply constraint
- iii. The companion video makes mention of this.

B. Gradient language

- i. Naming experiences along a continuum (rather than as binary)
- ii. Things moving in a direction, rather than arriving at a destination
 - 1. “Does that start to move you in the direction of the thing you’re wanting? How?”
 - 2. “What would you need to hold onto to stay enough out of the tangle to take the action you’re wanting to take?”
 - 3. “So it kept a blowout from happening? So it maybe knocked down a barrier between you but didn’t go all the way to the kind of connection you’re after?”

C. Intensity/Frequency/Duration of experience

- i. Broadly, these are: How potent is the experience? How often is it happening? How long has it been going on?

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- ii. Modern/prescriptive therapies also ask these, but our motivations are different from theirs.
 - 1. We **are not** asking these:
 - a. to measure their answer against a pre-made quantitative standard
 - b. to suggest an ideal rating/number, or
 - c. to arrive at a diagnosis
 - 2. We **are** asking these as a way to:
 - a. help co-create a robust qualitative account
 - b. hold specificity and track the person's preferences, and
 - c. map the *movement* of their lives relative to their goals

4) **ACTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS:** Relational understandings create possibility and movement.

These questions emerge from the philosophical/ethical stances of Johnella Bird's work (2000, 2004), specifically the relational consciousness and relational language-making practices of inquiry that she has developed. Please refer to the source material for foundational theory and practice.

A. "How does [this thing you're saying] relate to [this other thing you're saying]?" How does one impact or inform the other?" Not looking for causation, but a more robust account of experience. Also creating space for myriad relationships between two things.

B. Prepositions

- i. A preposition is a word that indicates a relationship between two words or elements used to indicate:
 - 1. place (e.g., a woman *on* the stairs)
 - 2. movement (e.g., a ball is rolling *into* the dark)
 - 3. time (e.g., they arrived *during* breakfast)
 - 4. who or what receives the direct object of the action (e.g., what did you do it *for*?)
- ii. All of these kinds of prepositions are useful for articulating greater specificity of experience, but (2) helps our aims of amplifying movement and change, and (4) helps anchor to values and intentions.
- iii. Examples:
 - 1. I feel such a sense of relief. "Relief *from*...?"
 - 1. I have this feeling of dread. "Dread *that*...?"
 - 2. I think I want to be stricter. "Stricter *than*...? Most? Someone else?"
 - 3. It would be risky for me to do. "What might the risk be? A risk *of*...?"
 - 4. I feel a sense of freedom. "Freedom *to*...? Freedom *from*...?"

C. Different metaphors/Kinds of relationship to intentions

- i. Think creatively about ways things relate to other things
 - 1. "So there's a kind of connection you've had in the past that you might want to shore up a little bit? Or re-ignite? Or re-engage?"

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2. “Are you wanting to stay married to this idea? Try for a trial separation? Get a divorce from it?”
3. “Does this feel like you’re drowning? Or treading water? Exhausted but making your way to shore?”
- ii. “What effect is this having on the problem you’re trying to solve?”
- iii. “When you’re holding onto this specific thing, what does it do to this other set of ideas you have?”

5) **GET SURGICAL:** Experience is specific.

A. Pronouns – It, Them, That.

- i. “What’s the ‘it’?” “Who all is ‘they’?” “When you say ‘that’, what exactly is ‘that’?”
- ii. The very purpose of grammatical pronouns is to stand in for something else and, at times, to collapse lots of details into one small word. Pronouns then are a small point of entry that can open up onto expanses of details.
- iii. Once you start looking, you’ll notice pronouns everywhere. You can’t engage them all. Some useful ones to pursue:
 1. Someone tells a long story and ends with ‘I just really want it.’ Or ‘that’s what it’s like.’ (“Want what?” “What’s the ‘it’?” “What *part* of it?” “What would you call it?”)
 2. Someone says ‘It’s been really hard.’ (“Which part?”)
 3. You’re in a longer-form conversation with a person over many sessions, and they say ‘I’m feeling that thing again.’ You could certainly ask “What thing” (as I do in the video example). But with an established relationship, oftentimes it is more connected, resonant, and generative to offer a *tentative* summary of what you are holding as ‘that thing’. (“The loneliness thing that happens when you’re away from home? The not knowing where you belong feeling? Or...?”) Punctuate the summary with an “or” as an invitation for them to correct or refine your account, and/or to create an opening for their present-moment experience.

B. Flavors – “What *kind* of anger?” “What *kind* of trust?” Moves out of general/broad tellings into greater and greater specificity.

C. Multiple Modalities of Experience (Freedman & Combs, pp. 94-95) – Expand tellings by asking about what the person was doing, thinking, feeling, seeing, hearing.

D. Offering options: This, this, or something else? In the process of making meaning, we can offer up possibilities for people to consider. This is referred to in the video as “being a thesaurus”.

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And two particularly important ways to be engaging with emerging specificity:

- E. Name the new, specific development its own thing.** “When you didn’t answer the phone on the first ring like you have before, what would you call that? What would you say that was?” A name that the person creates to capture the complex, felt experience of their lived experience. This can then become a readily-available shorthand for the person to grab in needed future moments.
- F. Summary and repetition.**
- i. I go back over the story multiple times with revisions and tweaks throughout the process of the unfolding.
 - ii. This is to:
 1. check in about the resonance of my understanding,
 2. continue to detail their experience with even greater specificity, and
 3. help anchor the story.
 - iii. This is demonstrated in the companion video as I walk through a woman’s experience of getting a phone call in the middle of the night.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

As you try on and engage these practices of close listening and the pursuit of specificity, take some time to notice and ask yourself: What are some indications that we have landed on a resonant account? What am I noticing in the other person that lets me know? What am I noticing in myself?

OVERARCHING TAKE-AWAYS

In closing, as you pursue greater specificity and experience-near tellings, a few gentle reminders:

1. Resist temptations to settle on general accounts. They can be dull and meaningless at a minimum and harmful at a maximum: they risk alienating people from their own experience and colonizing.
2. Engage Tiny Questions within the broader framework of double listening. Tiny Questions are intended to be a relational practice and experience of deep curiosity toward the particularities of people’s agency and dreamed-of lives that exist and evolve in the midst, alongside, and in spite of the difficulties that they face.
3. Be on the lookout for the details that amplify agency, movement, and change and anchor to people’s values, commitments, and intentions.

It is my sincere hope that by orienting toward more detailed accounts of people’s lives and engaging Tiny Questions in that pursuit, you will be co-creating experiences of expansiveness, creativity, connection, and liberation in the conversations you are having with people both in and out of the therapy room.

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Companion video correction: At the 25:50 mark, I say "pre-made agreement" when I've meant to say "pre-made account".