OPEN QUESTIONS
EXPLORATION STAGE

**Suggested assignment:** Before completing the exercises, read chapter 7 (“Open Questions and Probes”) in *Helping Skills.* In particular, students may want to review the types of open questions and examples in the chapter.

**Definition:** Open questions are questions that ask clients to clarify or explore thoughts or feelings. Helpers do not request specific information and do not purposefully limit the nature of the response to a “yes,” “no,” or a one- or two-word response.

**Intentions:** To focus, to clarify, to encourage catharsis, to identify maladaptive cognitions, to identify and intensify feelings

**Helpful hints:**
- Have an intention or therapeutic purpose for every question that you ask. In addition to purpose, in formulating your questions, consider focus (thoughts, feelings, or behaviors), time frame (past, present, future), and object (self or other).
  To gauge whether an open question is appropriate, ask yourself “Will the question I am about to ask be helpful to the client?”
- Be aware of attending behaviors: Keep the tone low to convey concern and intimacy, keep the rate of speech slow, and make questions tentative to avoid sounding as though you are interrogating the client.
- Avoid asking too many questions in a session, and avoid “why” questions that may sound critical and put your client on the defensive.
- Remember that the goal of asking open questions is to facilitate exploration. If the client is already exploring, there is no need to interrupt.

**Difficulties helpers may experience:**
- Asking the same type of open question repeatedly (e.g., “How do you feel about that?”)
- Using open questions exclusively rather than interspersing them with other types of interventions, such as restatements and reflection of feelings
- Asking multiple questions at one time
- Asking questions to satisfy the helper’s curiosity rather than helping the client explore

**For class discussion:** Compare restatements and open questions in terms of their potential to facilitate exploration.

**Practice Exercises for Open Questions**

1. CLIENT: My wife keeps nagging me to clean the garage. I don’t know why it’s such a big deal to her. I don’t bother her about cleaning the kitchen.
   
   Helper response:

2. CLIENT: I’ve been in therapy with five different therapists, and none of them have been able to help me. They just haven’t been very supportive and have been too quiet. I felt like I didn’t get anything out of the relationship. I hope you’re going to be different.
   
   Helper response:

3. CLIENT: I think I have a calling to go into the ministry. I had a dream last night where an angel came down and told me to enter the seminary. I think this might be what I am looking for in life. I’ve been trying to figure out how I could do something with my life that would be meaningful.
   
   Helper response:

4. CLIENT: The doctor told me yesterday that I have a lump in my breast. I have to get a biopsy to figure out if it is cancerous. But I feel sure that it will be cancer. I had two aunts who died of cancer when they were young, so it runs in my family.
   
   Helper response: