

Beginnings, middles, ends

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? activity

Statements of concern

Arriving at a clear statement of a concern is not simple. We often express our problems and concerns in fuzzy, unclear ways; they often need unravelling, especially if people have accepted others' definitions of their concerns. It can be a new, empowering experience to start to question these definitions. Of course, there are further complications if the main concern as you see it is not accepted by the person as a concern at all; or the main problem is seen as you!

Below are twelve statements which people might make in response to the question, 'What's the problem?' Can you match them to the four categories (A-D)?

My concern is . . .

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|---|--|----|--|
| 1 | He won't do as he is told. | 7 | He needs to stop drinking. |
| 2 | I can't pay the rent. | 8 | We're not happy. |
| 3 | You won't let us have our children back. | 9 | I want to have breakfast at whatever time I want it. |
| 4 | We don't know whether to let her leave home. | 10 | I feel depressed and I can't get down to anything. |
| 5 | I'm overweight and it's affecting my health. | 11 | The other kids in this home keep picking on me. |
| 6 | No-one understands me. | 12 | I keep getting caught. |

A Concerns which are really goals

Sometimes we express something we want to do (a goal) as a concern. What we mean is that what we want to do is a problem to somebody else. For example, as a resident of Oakbrook Home, I want to have breakfast at whatever time I want it (#9), but the problem is: 'the cook won't let me', or 'there's not enough staff on and I can't get it myself'. Also, the client's goal for somebody else can look like a problem statement: 'he needs to stop drinking' means 'I want him to stop drinking'.

B Concerns about other people

Most problems involve other people to an extent, but some statements focus only on the behaviour of somebody else (#1, #11). If the other person does not recognize this as a concern, the statement has to be reframed, such as #1: 'I get angry when he comes home late'; #11: 'I can't handle it when the other kids make fun of me'. These reframed statements bring the concern closer to the person's control. In #3, you are the problem. This is best expressed openly, and often it can be a focus for the work: what has to happen to get rid of the agency?

C Concerns which are not specific

Some statements of concern need much more careful spelling out. They give you a sense of how the client is feeling, for example #6 and #8, but you would not be clear about what needed to change in order to alleviate the difficulty. Broad, general statements need detailing so that you and the client know whether you can take steps to help with the concern. More details help you both to decide which direction those steps should take.

D Concerns which are specific

Some statements are relatively clear expressions of a concern, e.g. #2, #5. A successful outcome is more likely if the concern is relatively specific and the client is able to do something about it. However, many concerns are not like that; in these circumstances, your skill is to help the client to reframe the problem as much as possible towards a statement which is more specific and more within the client's influence. However, the reframing should not go so far that clients feel their original statement has been lost.