The Influence of "WHY": A Quick Reference for Clinicians

This document provides clinicians with a comprehensive guide to using "WHY" questions effectively in their practice.

It explores the potential of "WHY" to foster trust and engagement while highlighting potential pitfalls and providing practical alternatives.

AT **by Annette Tonkin**

Introduction to 'WHY' Questions

The word 'WHY' is powerful but can be challenging to use effectively.

When used poorly, it often evokes a defensive response, making clients feel judged or needing to justify their actions.

However, when used wisely, it can reveal a client's values and motivations, making it an invaluable tool for building engagement.

This guide helps clinicians understand when and how to use 'WHY' questions to foster trust and avoid resistance.

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When to Use 'WHY' Effectively

'WHY' questions are most effective when used to elicit values rather than to seek reasons.

For instance, asking *"Why is being able to run again important to you?"* helps a client reflect on their deeper motivations.

The key is to make sure that the 'WHY' feels supportive rather than accusatory.

- Effective Examples:
- ◦ "Why might you decide to try this treatment?"
- ◦ "Why might being more active be good for you?"
- ◦ "Why is this goal important to you?"

Using 'WHY' to explore motivations can lead to valuable insights and help clients feel heard and understood.

Rapport is essential before diving into such questions to ensure the client does not feel pressured.

'WHY' Questions to Avoid

Certain 'WHY' questions can easily create tension and resistance.

These are questions that come across as judgmental or accusatory, often making clients feel they need to defend themselves.

- Questions to Avoid:
- ◦ "Why haven't you followed through on your exercises?"
- ◦ "Why didn't you attend your pilates class?"
- ◦ "Why don't you create a schedule and stick to it?"
- ◦ "Why have you given up on your treatment plan?"

Instead, consider rephrasing these questions to avoid triggering a defensive response.

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Alternatives to 'WHY' Questions

To reduce defensiveness, try using open-ended questions that invite exploration without placing blame.

Here are some practical alternatives:

- Instead of: *"Why haven't you been doing your exercises?"* Try: *"What benefit do you think you might gain from doing your exercises?"*
- Instead of: *"Why can't you attend your appointments on time?"* Try: *"What time and day would work best for your appointments in the future?"*

These alternative questions are more likely to foster a productive conversation without making the client feel judged.

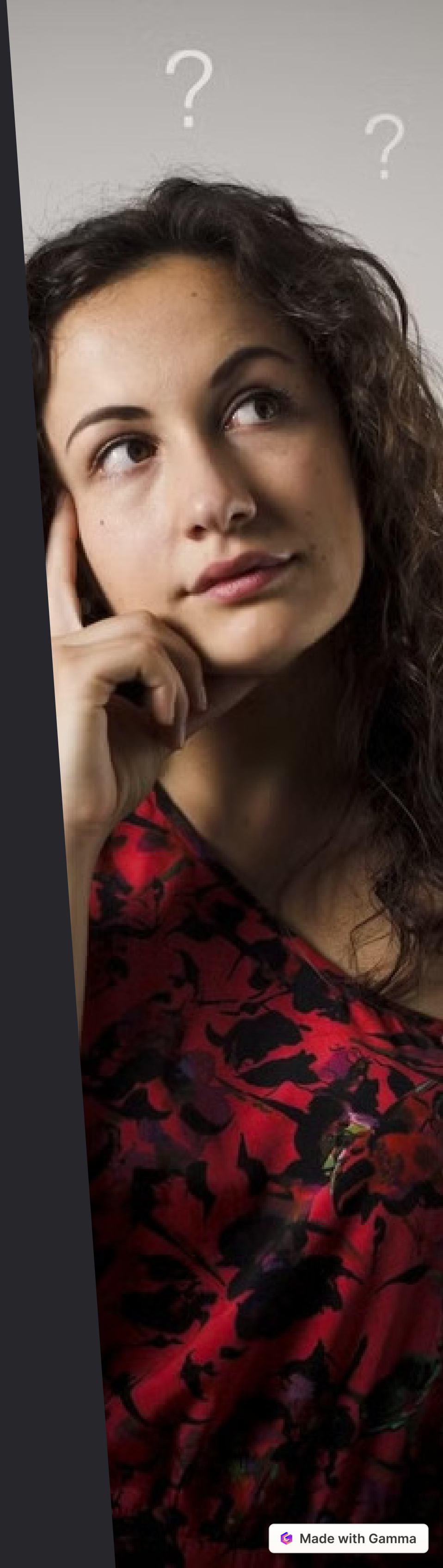
They also have the client mentally moving into the future and to create a workable solution.

Best Practices for 'WHY' Questions

Treat 'WHY' Questions Like a Hot Plate: Only touch it if you have a very good reason.

Make sure rapport is strong before asking 'WHY' questions.

- Focus on Values, Not Justifications: Use 'WHY' to explore what matters most to the client, not to justify past behaviour.
- Allow Processing Time: When asking a 'WHY' question, pause and give the client time to think and respond.



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Quick Reference

'WHY' Questions to Rely On	'WHY' Questions to Avoid
Why would (insert activity or behaviour change) be good for you to...?	Why haven't you...?
Why might this be important to you?	Why don't you bother...?
Why might you decide to...?	Why aren't you...?
Why might you...?	Why can't you...?
Why would you like to...?	Why wouldn't you...?
Why could (insert activity or behaviour change) work for you?	Why couldn't you...?

Use this table to quickly decide when a 'WHY' question is supportive versus when it might create resistance.

Summary of Key Tips

- Use 'WHY' Sparingly: It's effective for eliciting values, but it can be tricky. Only use it when you are confident it will not provoke defensiveness.
- Reframe Judgmental 'WHY' Questions: Shift focus from blame to exploration.
- Build Rapport First: Without strong rapport, 'WHY' can feel threatening.
- Practice Empathy: Always consider the client's emotional state before asking 'WHY'.

Remember: The influence of 'WHY' can be profound, but only if wielded with care.

Knowing when and how to ask 'WHY' can create trust, uncover motivations, and ultimately lead to better client outcomes.

Feel free to share this resource to help more clinicians master the art of using 'Why' questions

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Website: **thinking.physio**

Email: **annette@thinking.physio**

Socials: **Facebook** & **Instagram**: Thinking.physio | **LinkedIn**: **Annette Tonkin**

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