

UNITE RESOURCES

# Asking Good Questions

BC MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE SERVICES

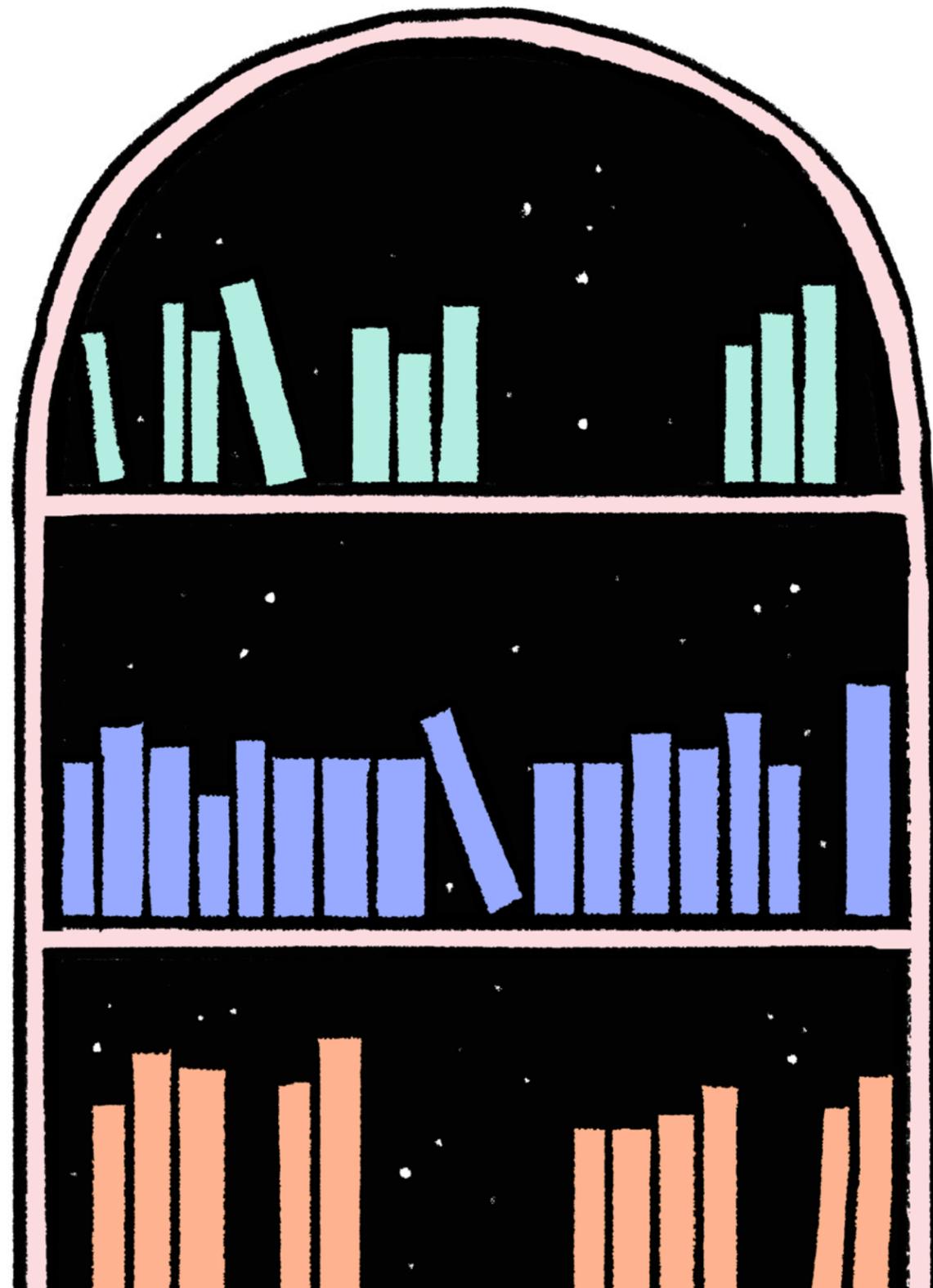


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“In order to be able to ask, one must want to know, and that means knowing that one does not know.”

—**Hans-Georg Gadamer**



ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS is an important element of dialogue. Good questions come from a position of genuine curiosity and are motivated by an authentic interest—an honest seeking. They do not position the listener as inferior; that is, they do not suggest that the questioner knows whereas the listeners must prove their knowledge. Good questions do not support one side and exclude the consideration of the opposite. Instead, they are open to possibilities and take multiple perspectives and opinions into account.

When working with people facing mental health or substance use challenges, exploring good questions will be more helpful than providing information or advice. In questioning, our intention is to learn from the other—to expand both our view and our understanding. The openness to explore, to ask, and to question is essential to gaining understanding and learning from each other. This learning involves listening to another experience, which may be very different from our own, and then responding with genuine questions.

To be able to ask good questions, we need to have good imaginations. In a context of stigmatizing assumptions and discriminatory actions, we tend to fall back on established patterns of thinking and acting. We need to find new ways of looking at things and engaging with each other. Good questions can deeply impact the way we think, act, and treat others.

## Good questions are open

IN CONTRAST TO closed questions which elicit short, specific responses, open questions are like an open door to a world of possibility. These are questions for which there are no simple answers. Open questions encourage us to explore, identify our assumptions, and think “what if?” They can stimulate thinking about complex issues and invite people to try new things. Closed questions may be useful for collecting quick facts or information, but do little to bring people together. Engaging people around open questions is one of the most powerful ways of creating dialogue. It can challenge our core beliefs, build deeper understanding, and tap into the collective capacity of the community.

### EXAMPLES

**CLOSED** What symptoms are you experiencing? When did you notice symptoms starting?

**OPEN** Would you share with me how you know you are beginning to feel unwell?

**CLOSED** How many times have you been in the psych ward?

**OPEN** Can you share a bit about your experience of the psych ward?

**CLOSED** Do you have anybody to take care of you during your treatment?

**OPEN** How do you think your family/friends can support you during your treatment?

### EXERCISE

*Try to reframe each of the following closed questions to be more open (helpful for generating discussion and understanding rather than collecting facts).*

- Are you comfortable living in a shelter?
- What treatments have you had in the past?
- In the past month, how often have you felt hopeless?



## Good questions are not rhetorical

THEY ARE NOT QUESTIONS that assume one answer and shut down others. They do not try to persuade or influence the other. The answer is not already settled. Instead, good questions are open to possibilities. This openness allows people to explore and view the concept at hand from different angles and answer however they feel most comfortable.

### EXAMPLES

**RHETORICAL** Why do you vape even though it is so harmful?

**ALTERNATIVE** Can you share a bit about why you vape and how you see it impacting your life?

**RHETORICAL** Don't you think your mood is the reason you feel this way?

**ALTERNATIVE** Why do you think you feel this way?

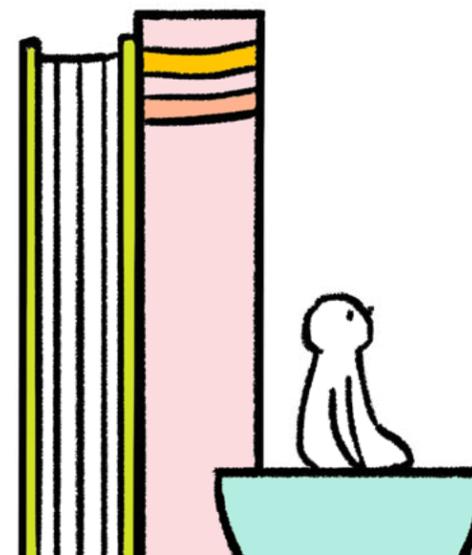
**RHETORICAL** Does taking your medication reduce your symptoms?

**ALTERNATIVE:** Can you describe for me your experience of what happens when you take the medication?

### EXERCISE

*Try to reframe each of the following rhetorical questions to be less leading (helpful for generating discussion and understanding rather than making a point).*

- How would your family feel if they knew about your diagnosis?
- You don't mean to kill yourself, right?
- In what ways are your children affected by your drinking?
- Don't you think it's a no-brainer whether you should take your medication?



## Good questions explore experience

THEY TAP INTO HOW something is felt or appears to us. They encourage us to describe things precisely and thoroughly with as little interpretation as possible. Such phenomenological questions require us to observe and reflect on our thoughts and feelings as we interact with the ideas presented to us.

### EXAMPLES

- When your mom was calling the police, what was happening inside of you? How do you think your mother was feeling?
- What was it like when the pharmacist treated you that way? (this could follow a report of either a positive or negative encounter)
- I am sorry you had that experience at Emergency. Could you tell me a bit about how that experience has affected you?

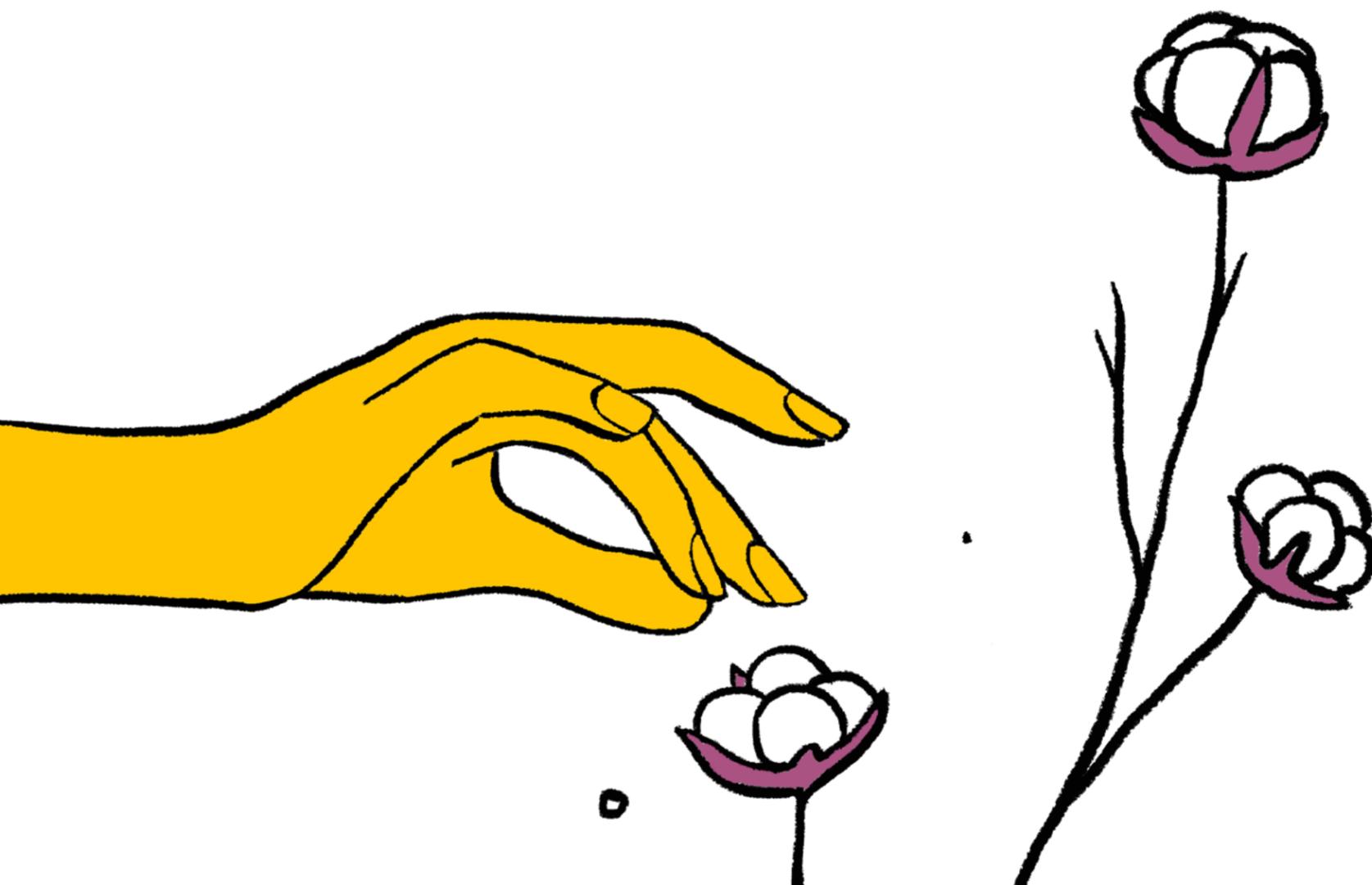
THE UNPREDICTABLE NATURE of genuine questions can be unsettling. However, when we are unsettled, we become aware of and begin to reconsider our values and assumptions. Good questions surface underlying assumptions. Good listening provides new possibilities. Creating a conversation in which all participants feel safe to question and to listen without fear of experiencing hostility is essential to building understanding and growth.

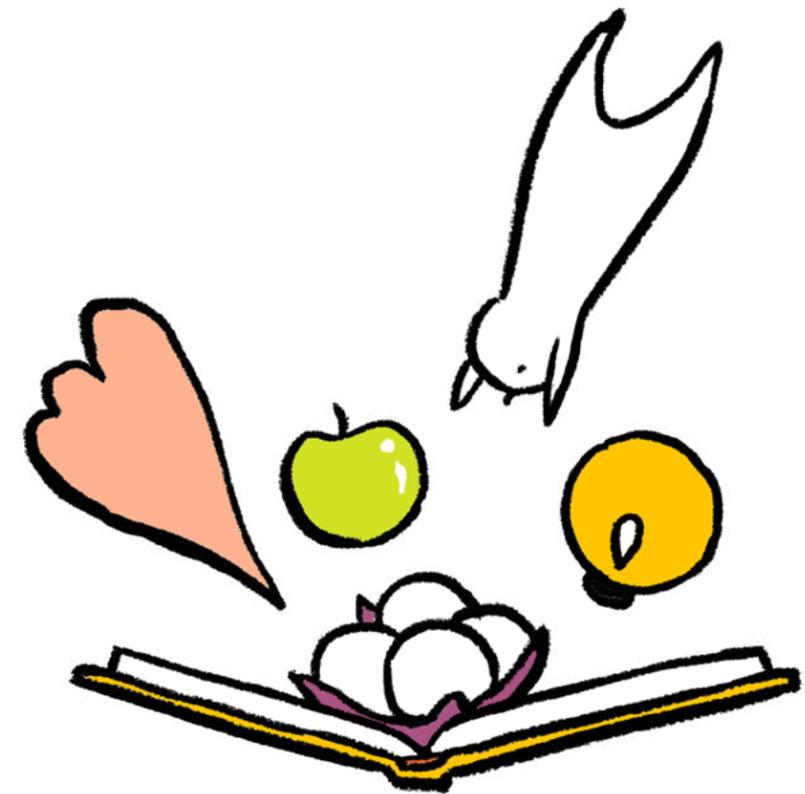
The back and forth of good questions and responses is the essence of dialogue. Real dialogue builds new relationships that allow us to see ourselves and others differently. It facilitates mutual trust and respect even when we disagree. It transcends differences and creates space for collaboration and collective action in order to build a better future free from stigma and discrimination.

### A GOOD, POWERFUL QUESTION CAN:

- Generate curiosity in the listener
- Stimulate reflective conversation
- Surface underlying assumptions
- Invite creativity and new possibilities
- Generate energy and forward movement
- Touch a deep meaning
- Evoke more questions

–Adapted from Vogt, et al.





#### SOURCES

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