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Conversation Starters and Language Shifts for Navigating Resistance in High-Functioning Clients

QUICK GUIDE: "WHAT IF THEY SHUT DOWN?"

SUBSTANCE USE CONVERSATIONS WITH HIGH-PERFORMING CLIENTS

SAMPLE OPENERS TO REDUCE DEFENSIVENESS

Use these to start the conversation with curiosity, not accusation.

- "Many people in high-stress roles use something to cope—can I ask how you manage when things get tough?"
- "Sometimes success masks struggle. What's been helping you keep things together lately?"
- "You've mentioned sleep and focus have changed—should we explore what might be contributing?"

LANGUAGE SHIFTS THAT KEEP THE DOOR OPEN - SWAP CONFRONTATION FOR CURIOSITY.

INSTEAD OF...	TRY...
"Are you drinking too much?"	"Have you noticed any changes in your habits?"
"That sounds like denial."	"I wonder what's underneath that response."
"You don't seem like yourself."	"What's been weighing on you lately?"
"Why didn't you mention this before?"	"When did this start feeling harder to talk about?"



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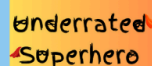
COMMON DEFLECTION PATTERNS & REDIRECTIONS

- **PATTERN: "I'M FINE. I'M JUST TIRED."**
 - Redirect: "Understood. Can we explore if that tiredness might be layered—physical, emotional, or even something more?"
- **PATTERN: "PEOPLE HAVE IT WORSE."**
 - Redirect: "That may be true—and I want to make sure you're not slipping through the cracks because of that comparison."
- **PATTERN: "I HAVE TOO MUCH ON MY PLATE TO DEAL WITH THIS."**
 - Redirect: "That makes sense. Can we explore one small area where relief might make everything else more manageable?"

STAYING GROUNDED YOURSELF

- Reframe resistance as self-protection, not rejection.
- Breathe before responding—especially if you feel challenged.
- Use phrases like: "You don't have to have answers right now," or "Let's just stay curious a moment longer."

WHEN TO USE THIS: USE DURING INTAKE, EARLY RAPPORT-BUILDING, OR WHEN PROGRESS PLATEAUS.



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