

Trust-Building Conversation Starters

Questions That Actually Work When Someone Doesn't Want to Talk

How to Use This Tool:

These conversation starters are designed for the moments when traditional rapport-building falls flat. When a client is court-ordered, resentful, or shut down, generic questions like 'How are you feeling today?' often backfire. These alternatives acknowledge the elephant in the room, reduce power dynamics, and create openings for genuine connection. Use them as starting points—adapt to your style and your client's situation.

FIRST SESSION / INITIAL CONTACT

When They're Mandated & Resentful

- "You may not have chosen to be here. What would make this time less of a waste for you?"
- "Most people in your situation are pretty skeptical of counselors. What have you heard about ..."
- "I'm not here to fix you or lecture you. What would actually be helpful to talk about?"
- "What do you wish I understood about your situation that I probably don't?"

What worked / Notes:

When They Won't Make Eye Contact or Speak

- "You don't have to talk if you're not ready. We can just sit here, or I can tell you how this..."
- "I notice you're pretty quiet. That's okay. Sometimes silence is the smartest move when you d..."
- "What would help you feel safer in here? Less like an interrogation, more like a conversation?"
- "Is there anything you need me to know before we go any further?"

What worked / Notes:

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BUILDING ONGOING RAPPORT

Finding Their Strengths & Values

- "What's one thing that's going okay in your life right now, even if it's small?"
- "Outside of all this court stuff—what do you actually care about?"
- "Who in your life gets you? Who actually understands what you're dealing with?"
- "What do you do when you need to clear your head?"

What worked / Notes:

Exploring Identity Beyond the Label

- "What's something you're good at that most people don't know about?"
- "If this legal stuff wasn't happening, what would you be focused on right now?"
- "What kind of person do you want to be? Not what everyone else wants—what do YOU want?"
- "When's the last time you felt proud of yourself?"

What worked / Notes:

Addressing Past Negative Experiences

- "How have other counselors or programs missed the mark with you before?"
- "What's something I should avoid doing if I want this to actually work?"
- "What would it look like if I actually earned your trust? What would I need to do?"
- "Is there anything I've said or done that rubbed you the wrong way? I'd rather know."

What worked / Notes:

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NAVIGATING DIFFICULT MOMENTS

When They Shut Down Mid-Session

- "Something shifted just now. Want to tell me what's going on, or do you need a minute?"
- "I can see this is hitting different today. What do you need right now?"
- "We don't have to keep talking about this. What would help?"
- "Take your time. I'm not going anywhere."

What worked / Notes:

When They're Angry or Hostile

- "You seem frustrated with me. What's going on?"
- "I hear you. And I'm still here. What do you need me to understand?"
- "I'd rather you be honest and frustrated than fake and polite. What's really on your mind?"
- "I'm not your enemy here, but I get why it might feel that way. What would help?"

What worked / Notes:

When They Say 'I Don't Trust You'

- "I'm not asking you to trust me yet. I'm asking if you're willing to give this a shot."
- "Trust takes time. What's one small thing we could work on that might matter to you?"
- "You've probably had people let you down before. I can't promise I'll be perfect, but I can p..."
- "What would I need to do to earn even a little bit of trust from you?"

What worked / Notes:

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AFTER SETBACKS OR RELAPSES

When They've Used or Relapsed

- "You're here. That matters. What happened?"
- "I'm not here to judge you or lecture you. What do you need right now?"
- "Setbacks happen. What do you want to do about it?"
- "What was going on before the use? Help me understand the context."

What worked / Notes:

When They Missed Sessions/Disappeared

- "You came back. That took guts. What made you come back?"
- "I'm glad you're here. No lectures—just want to know how you're doing."
- "What's different now compared to when you left?"
- "What do you need from me to make this worth your time?"

What worked / Notes:

Processing What Happened

- "What's one thing you'd do differently if you could go back?"
- "What did you learn about yourself from this?"
- "What needs to be different in your plan going forward?"
- "Who or what helped you get back on track?"

What worked / Notes:

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MY GO-TO STARTERS & NOTES

Starters That Work Best With My Clients:

My Own Adaptations / Original Starters:

Client-Specific Notes:
