

When they come with no topic

We're told that coaching is about working to the client's agenda and working in partnership with the client. Coaching sessions are most useful when the client is thinking about something relevant to them. But many young people, particularly those new to personal development support and coaching-type conversations, may not bring a topic.

How often have you been faced with a client saying "I don't know" when asked what it is that they'd like to focus on in a session. I've certainly heard it plenty, but I've used it plenty too. Sometimes I just need time to think and put all the thoughts in my head into words. Sometimes I just don't know where to start. And sometimes I don't knowingly have a specific think I want to think about at that moment in time. Sometimes I just need space to reflect first.

Why clients might not bring a topic

- They may not yet know what is relevant or safe to talk about in the space.
- They may not yet be confident enough to put forward a topic for conversation, especially when attendance is mandatory.
- They expect you to direct the session.
- They've haven't had time to reflect and prepare.

The practitioner must therefore support the client to get something useful from the time together, while building the client's trust, confidence and awareness of the service, without disempowering them or working to someone else's agenda.

Group sessions are a great way to build trust and demonstrate what sort of things may be discussed. Prompts (see opposite) may also help the client reflect and find something to talk about without being disempowered.

Some things to remember

- 'I don't know' doesn't always mean that they don't know. A client may have something they want to talk about, but which they are not aware of or not willing to share at the start, so do keep checking in.
- It's beneficial to contract or right-size for the session, even if the client has no idea what they want to talk about. 'Just having a chat' is a valid topic, if that's what they want from the session.
- Even if a client doesn't ever have a topic they want to discuss, do still ask at the start of every session. Someday they will surprise you.
- The priority, at all times, is to ensure that the client retains as much autonomy as possible.

Some prompts and tools to help clients bring something useful into the session:

- Read a poem, and get the client to talk about what in the poem resonates with them. See where that leads.
- Choose a piece of art and, as above, get them to talk about what in the art resonates with them.
- Ask them to bring or choose an item that resonates with them at the moment, and discuss why that item resonates.
- Use a basic needs analysis or audit that has an emphasis on getting them to talk (e.g. getting them to rate their organisation skills and then talk about why they gave themselves that score). Then get them to choose which item from the needs-analysis they'd like to explore further (don't presume that it's the item they scored the lowest).
- Give them a set amount of time to do a piece of freewriting or subconscious roll (where they put pen to paper and keep writing, whatever comes to their head, for a set period of time, without censoring what they're writing).
- Provide them with a deck of The Mood Cards (andrea-harrn.co.uk), or similar, and get them to pick three cards that represent how they feel about life right now.
- Get them to choose a card from a deck Road cards (Roads: A deck of projective cards) that represents where they are with life right now.
- Get them to create an impromptu collage (or Lego construction), without thinking too much about it, and then explore together what it might represent.
- Get them to list or talk through what they've been doing in the past week, and rate how much they enjoyed each activity.
- Ask them to explore what they feel or notice in their body.
- Do some chair work: get them to sit in a third chair and to embody their coach, parent or partner, for example, and ask them what they think the client should discuss. Alternatively, get them to embody their inbox or to-do list, and ask them what the client should attend to.
- Have a menu of example topics that could be discussed. You could have four or five common topics for different groups of clients (e.g. first-year students, athletes moving from junior to senior competition, clients about to retire from sport) and mention that these are some of the themes other individuals have found useful to discuss. Include 'miscellaneous' or 'your own topics' as one of the options, as a reminder that they can bring their own topics.



Sample needs analysis to initiate conversation

This is a very simple needs analysis activity that you can do with new clients. You can complete it together during a session, or they can complete it in advance. The idea is that it generates discussion on a number of aspects of their lives. Substitute career for academics when working with clients in employment rather than education.

Scoring Scale									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
☹️				☹️					☺️
Dread it				Tolerate it				Love it	
Disaster zone				Surviving				Excelling	

Sport

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Performance
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Enjoyment

Academics

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Performance
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Enjoyment

Physical health

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Mental health

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Planning and organisation skills

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Budgeting and money management skills

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Aspirations: _____

Areas for improvement: _____

Comments: _____
