

Helping Others Advocate for Their Thoughts and Feelings

A set of strategies for helping someone find and use their own voice about what they think and feel — useful across therapeutic, educational, and caring relationships.

Core strategies

Socratic questioning: Open, curious questions that help someone explore their own thinking, rather than being told what to think.

Modelling: Showing how to talk about thoughts and feelings, and how to think through a problem, rather than only instructing.

Teaching the process: Making the "how" explicit, not just the content — so the skill transfers beyond the current conversation.

Affirmations: Naming the skills and values you notice in the person, so they have language for their own strengths.

Accessible language: Being specific and concrete rather than abstract, so the ideas are genuinely easy to follow.

Externalising: Separating the person from the difficulty — naming the distress, or the effort to regain control, as something being navigated rather than who they are.

Socratic questioning in more depth

Socratic questioning is a core CBT technique for exploring the content and meaning of someone's experience, and for helping them consider a perspective they hadn't reached on their own. Wells (1997) sets out five guiding principles: the questions should be ones the person can actually answer; they should be directed toward a clear goal (understanding their thinking, feeling, or behaviour in a situation, or helping them consider an alternative view); they should be open rather than closed (when, where, how, rather than why); the person should never feel interrogated; and the helper should be genuinely trying to understand the person's experience from the inside, not simply steering them toward a predetermined answer.

Three verbal structures

General questions: Open up a specific area of enquiry — often a particular incident — to explore thoughts, feelings, and behaviour at that time. For example: "What happened the last time you had a panic attack?"

Probe questions: Once an area is open, a series of more specific questions clarifies a point or builds a fuller picture of the person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour in that moment.

Reflections: Brief summaries of what the person has just said, usually paired with a follow-up probe question — signalling that they're genuinely being heard and understood, not just processed.

Grounded in Socratic questioning as described in Wells, A. (1997). Cognitive Therapy of Anxiety Disorders: A Practice Manual and Conceptual Guide. Wiley.