

## BOOK REVIEW

***What Do I Say? The Therapist's Guide to Answering Client Questions* by Linda N. Edelstein and Charles A. Waehler.  
Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011, 358 pp. ISBN:  
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Psychotherapists from all theoretical perspectives will be asked questions by their clients. These are moments to which all psychotherapists pay special attention, in that the client has suddenly changed the focus of the treatment. It is a potentially important moment, and the therapist's theoretical orientation may guide how to respond. It is also a complicated moment, in that the question can have multiple meanings. Another important element in this situation is that the work is immediately in the room. The next few moments that unfold give both the therapist and the client information about each other. "Is it alright to ask something directly of my therapist?" "Am I comfortable being asked a direct question by my client, or this particular client?" The way the psychotherapist and client handle the moment can deepen the treatment or disappointingly stagnate it. Edelstein and Waehler have written a book about the most important question that all therapists ask themselves throughout every session: "What do I say?" In their book with the straightforward title, *What Do I Say? The Therapist's Guide to Answering Client Questions*, they tackle this topic with practical and experienced wisdom.

The book is divided into sections based on special topics about which clients ask questions of their therapists. The authors organized the book in two main parts. The first section orients the reader to the importance of understanding the range of possibilities that underlie questions posed by clients. The second part focuses on particular themes that are often asked by clients. These include such varied topics as prejudice, confidentiality, sexuality, ethnic and cultural differences, money, boundaries, and several more that are familiar to all clinicians. Edelstein and Waehler remind the clinician that our role as psychotherapists is to always keep in mind that no matter what is asked, "it is not about you." This mantra, that they urge the psychotherapist to hold in mind, helps him or her maintain an important stance toward the client, regardless of theoretical orientation. In other words, responses must always have the intention of helping the psychotherapist understand the client. During moments that can shake any therapist out of his or her role, this perspective may help all psychotherapists remain composed, even if this kind of attention raises their anxiety. However, the opposite is also true, in that the questions our clients ask are very much about us, the psychotherapists. Our clients are naturally curious about the person to whom they reveal so much about themselves. These curiosities can range from the kind of life their psychotherapist has, to the trustworthiness of that person.

Therefore, our responses reveal something about ourselves as well. Edelstein and Waehler are aware that psychotherapists have different comfort levels about how and what they reveal about themselves, and they support each therapist to attend to this personal experience in their work. This is one of the strengths of their book. The authors are not especially interested in the right way to do it, but rather the best way for each therapist to discover his and her voice, which will allow them to be fully present with their clients.

The book is particularly useful for younger clinicians. In my own supervision with graduate students and interns, young clinicians always comment on how anxious they are about the possibility of being asked a personal question, or their own hesitance to invite the client to ask them questions if they have any. Often their anxiety is about not knowing what to say or how to say something that will be part of a therapeutic process. In this book, the authors provide the language that beginning psychotherapists will appreciate. For example, a common question, and one that young clinicians dread, is about age. It is best to demonstrate the kind of guidance offered in the book with the author's own words, "Younger clinicians get the question far more than older therapists, but older therapists get the same question for the same basic reason, 'Will you understand me?' You can respond, 'I'm glad to answer, but why do you ask?' or 'I'm not sure how my age matters, but I want to hear what you are worrying about.' 'Of course you want a competent therapist. Let's talk about why you are here, and we will be better able to assess if I can be of help to you'" (p. 52). It is the variety of responses and, importantly, the underlying meanings that may be associated with the questions being asked, which are elaborated throughout the chapters and make this book a valuable guide in learning to work with clients.

The authors do an exceptional job in staying away from theoretical allegiances that may lead clinicians to judge the correctness of a response. Instead, we are presented with what could be understood to be nonspecific factors that are relevant across therapy modality, or theoretical approach, and which will be familiar to all clinicians. All of the topics discussed involve questions that are likely to be asked of all clinicians at some point, by some clients, and each client may have a different reason for asking. These are moments in the psychotherapeutic process that all therapists have encountered, and each therapist needs to have a unique and authentic voice in responding. Edelstein and Waehler encourage the development of the therapist's confidence in this area by showing that there are many ways in which one can answer, and there are a variety of meanings that need to be clarified in the answering process.

As a supervisor, I try to teach supervisees to trust their reactions to the client as a useful source of information about their clients and the work that is unfolding. Supervisees are grateful to learn a variety of ways in which they can respond to their clients, which can be well received and can also further the work. In a recent session, a client began by asking, "Where is this going?" The question surprised me because I understood him to be making important strides in his struggle to manage difficult relationships

and ultimately to feel better about himself, which could lead to a better life. Because I had been reading this book, it was a fresh opportunity to see how I responded to such inquiries from my own clients. I started slowly and asked him whether he has been feeling uncertain about “where this is going?” He stated that he came into treatment with a specific goal in mind of getting into a romantic relationship. As we discussed this goal in relation to what I understood about our goal, as well as to what I understood about his progress, it became apparent that he was asking a far more profound question. He revealed that if he cannot have hope about developing more meaningful relationships, then he would want to end his life. It became apparent that his question also had the urgency in it of “will this therapy save my life?” His question was vital in our process and had the potential to “save his life” by leading to a better understanding about how he participates in his life.

The capacity of the psychotherapist to tolerate anxiety stemming from not immediately knowing the full meaning of any question can help any therapist to think clearly and not just try to get through questions when they are posed by clients. This book

provides the building blocks to help clinicians recognize that they can use the questions that clients ask to further their work. *What Do I Say?* is a useful guide for beginning psychotherapists and, therefore, is appropriate for most graduate courses on psychotherapeutic process. This book is equally useful for any psychotherapy supervisor who encounters supervisees’ anxiety about bringing the psychotherapy process into the here and now, a therapy moment that makes both therapists and clients anxious. It is a reminder that the human desire to have a trusting and authentic connection with another person is at the heart of a thriving psychotherapeutic process. When our clients ask us questions, psychotherapists are immediately struck by the realness of the interaction, and this offers the possibility of enriching the therapeutic process. This needs to be appreciated by clinicians as they are growing in their craft. Edelstein and Waehler have written a book that can enhance the confidence of the novice psychotherapist. It will also remind seasoned clinicians that their learned methods of tolerating questions and responding with curiosity, as well as respect, guide their clients through the process of understanding how they are furthering their own work by asking.