

**Before people change, they must be able to IMAGINE changing.  
Reflexive questions can make a different response  
to the same issue feel possible.**



Reflexive questions can help families imagine a more preferred version of the same situation, like a mental rehearsal, so new behaviour becomes thinkable.  
They work best when we know the pattern (often mapped with circular questions).  
Reflexive questions ask, *“Okay, given this loop... where do we have options?”*  
They help the family test-drive a small change in their heads before trying it in real life.

The power is that **the question itself becomes the intervention**: the family generates the alternatives themselves, so it feels doable rather than like advice



## Reflexive questions in action

### Scenario:

- Leanne is a single mum whose children Amy (27) and Mia (25) live with her.
- Amy’s boyfriend stays over a lot, often unannounced.
- Leanne feels the house is losing privacy and calm.
- Mia feels uncomfortable sharing the house so often with a man she doesn’t know all that well, and she hates not knowing when he will be there.
- Amy feels judged and controlled and wants adult freedom.

### Step 1: Identify what the stuck pattern looks like (use circular questioning)

- Leanne (Mum) gets anxious → brings in rules or comments.
- Amy feels controlled → doesn’t share plans → boyfriend appears anyway.
- Mia feels on edge → avoids shared spaces → resentment builds → eventually she snaps.
- All 3 argue, then everyone cools off, but nothing is changed, so it repeats.

### Step 2: Consider reflexive question options



#### Design a 10% improvement:

“What one small change would make this 10% easier this week (for example, notice in advance, set nights, quiet hours, shared-space agreements)?”

#### Miracle question:

“Tonight, a miracle happens and this problem is genuinely better. Tomorrow morning, what is the first small sign each of you would notice that tells you it’s improved?”



## Step 3: The Conversation

**Therapist:** “Let me summarise the loop in two lines: Leanne (Mum) feels surprised and anxious, so tightens rules, Amy feels controlled and stops sharing plans, Mia feels uncomfortable and withdraws. Then it blows up, calms and repeats. Have I got that right?” (All nod in agreement) “Okay. Let’s see if we can imagine a version of the same situation that could avoid some of the negative feelings and the argument at the end. Not “who’s right,” but “what could be different next time.” Mia, if this stayed the same but was 10% easier, what would be the smallest change that would help?”

**Mia:** “A heads-up text message earlier in the day if he’s staying. Not last minute.”

**T:** “Amy, what do you assume Mia’s heads-up request means about you?”

**Amy:** “That she wants to avoid us, she doesn’t like having him around.”

**T:** “Mia, has she got that right?”

**Mia:** “No. It’s the surprise. I want to know what to expect and feel relaxed in my own house.”

**T:** “Mum, if you could protect your calm without it coming out as a rule, what would you say instead?”

**Mum:** “I could say, ‘Can we have a plan so I’m not surprised?’”

**T:** “Amy, what plan would let you feel like you’re respected as an adult and still help them feel settled?”

**Amy:** “I message by 4 pm if he’s staying, and we pick two nights max for now.”

**T:** “So miracle question: If a miracle happens and this problem is genuinely better tomorrow morning, what is the first small sign each of you notices?”

**Mum:** “I wake up and feel calm in my own house.”

**Mia:** “I walk to the bathroom without doing the ‘is he here?’ scan.”

**Amy:** “I don’t brace for comments.”

**T:** “So the ‘miracle’ looks like predictability and less bracing. Amy, remind us all, so we’re clear, what is the plan to trial?”

**Amy:** “Heads-up by 4 pm, and I think only two nights per week for now.”

## Step 4: Possible new conversation next time now that the change has been imagined

**Amy:** “Josh is staying tonight. I’ll text if plans change.”

**Mum (Leanne):** “Thanks for the heads-up.”

**Mia:** “Okay. I’m going to cook now, then I’m heading out with friends.”

**Amy:** “All good.”

## Further reading



**Article:** Tomm, K. (1987). Interventive interviewing: Part II. Reflexive questioning as a means to enable self-healing. *Family process*, 26(2), 167-183. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.1987.00167.x> **Why?** The clearest “what reflexive questions are and what they’re for” paper, with a practical orientation.

**Book:** Dallos, R., & Vetere, A. (2018). *Working systemically with families: Formulation, intervention and evaluation*. Routledge. **Why?** Good skills-oriented intro to systemic practice

**If you’d like to learn more, please contact us at the Bouverie Centre:**

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