

Motivational Interviewing Part 1

Expressing Empathy

Avoiding Arguments

INTRODUCTION

Motivational interviewing (MI) is a counselling approach that aims to increase internal or intrinsic motivation for change by identifying and resolving ambivalence to this change. Essentially MI seeks to explore and resolve the factors that lead a person to want to change, whilst at the same time not want to change. The therapist or does this by adopting a key set of skills aimed at fostering a trusting, therapeutic relationship with the client, as well as directing the client to consider their problematic behaviour from a number of angles.

Motivational Interview was developed by clinical psychologists William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick in 1983, and further refined in 1991. The technique was first described to address people with problematic drinking habits who were not showing improvements through other treatment methods. Whilst motivational interviewing is 'client-centred' in its approach (having the client/therapist relationship at its core), it is quite directive and goal oriented in nature. It is the therapists job to simultaneously form a therapeutic relationship or bond with the client, whilst attempting to influence them to consider the possibility of making changes, rather than simply engaging in personal exploration work.

Motivational Interviewing rests on 5 core elements or principles:

- 1. Expressing Empathy**
- 2. Avoiding Arguments**
- 3. Developing Discrepancy**
- 4. Rolling with Resistance**
- 5. Supporting Self Efficacy**

Before we begin exploring each of these core principles, it is important to get ourselves 'ready' to practicing Motivational Interviewing. One helpful way to ready ourselves is to agree to leave a number of assumptions out of the process. This can be easier said than done sometimes. Try and really visualize each of these assumptions and picture the implications if we brought these assumptions into a conversation with a client or student.

- This person SHOULD change
- This person WANTS to change
- This person's health is the prime motivating factor for him/her
- If he/she does not decide to change, the intervention has failed, and so have I
- People are either motivated to change, or they're not
- Now is the right time to consider change
- Tough love is always best
- I am the expert, and he/she should follow my advice
- This person needs GOOD advice

Whilst these statements aren't necessarily harmful, they can actually act to put up walls and barriers to the process of change. Let's use the example of "This person SHOULD change". It may be the case that the individual is placing themselves at physical and psychological risk of harm by engaging in their current behaviors (let's say daily ice habit), they may have a range of residual problems associated with their behavior, they may even be about to lose everything.

Now let's say this client or student is a 15 year old female who is obtaining drugs through soliciting with older dealers. This is a harrowing picture, and no doubt highly confronting for the professional working with this girl. But let's look at the word SHOULD. We may feel compelled to tell this girl to stop what she's doing and return home, we may even feel compelled to rescue her. After all we are all human, and tend to get into this sort of work because we actually care about young people. But by adopting the idea of SHOULD, we enter into the relationship already having formed a moral judgement about this person, what they are doing, and what they should be doing instead. Anything short of this outcome will be a failure, and because of the word SHOULD, that failure will need to be attributed somewhere. Either onto the girl, or onto us.

So, if we leave the morally laden SHOULD at the door, what do we replace it with? The answer is simply PROCESS. Motivational Interviewing is, at its core, a process driven intervention, not a results driven intervention. Whatever we believe about a client's behaviors is in some ways irrelevant, as long as we follow the process, we need not worry about should or shouldn't, must or mustn't, right or wrong.

After all, we could probably bet that there would be no shortage of people in this girl's life telling her that she SHOULDN'T be doing what she's doing. And yet she's STILL doing it. We need to come from a difference angle. This is where Motivational Interviewing is extremely valuable.

Another important consideration prior to looking into the key elements of MI is identifying where this client sits in the Stages of Change model. This is outlined in detail in Episode 6 of this training package. Please familiarize yourself with this model before proceeding.

Now let's look at the key elements of Motivational Interviewing.

CORE ELEMENT 1 - EXPRESSING EMPATHY

The first key element we must practice in Motivational Interviewing is the expression of empathy to the client. Empathy is essentially the ability to understand or feel what another person is experiencing from their point of view. In other words, the capacity to step into another person's shoes. **Empathy** differs from **sympathy** in that sympathy is the act of sharing an emotion or feeling, usually of sadness, pity or compassion with another person. With empathy, you put yourself in someone's shoes, and attempt to not only share a feeling, but to experience this feeling from their perspective.

I like to think of this in terms of 3 levels of depth:

1. Being able to experience another's perspective, from **my own** point of view.
 - "What would I have felt like during that experience?"
2. Being able to experience another's perspective, from **their** point of view;
 - "What would **they** have felt like during that experience?"
3. Being able to communicate this emotional understanding back to the client
 - "How can I communicate to the client that I have felt things from their perspective?"

There are a number of key ways we can convey empathy back to a client during Motivational Interviewing:

- **Ask open-ended questions**
- **Reflective listening**
- **Affirm**
- **Summary Clarification**

Ask open-ended questions

Open ended questions and statements are designed to draw out information from another person without a concrete limit or constraint on the response. Closed questions are questions that can adequately be answered in fixed or finite ways, usually able to be answered in a single word. The purpose of using open ended questions in Motivational Interviewing is to draw out more information from the client, having the client talking and sharing more about themselves, and to generally create a feel of conversation rather than interrogation or assessment.

Some examples of non-open or closed questions are:

- "Was that difficult for you?"
- "How many cones are you smoking per day?"
- "When did this all start?"
- "That must have left you feeling sad"
- "How are you going?"
- "Did you find the place alright?"
- "Do you think you have a drinking problem?"

Whilst the information gathered from asking these questions may be valuable to know, the style of the questions does not lead to a warm, flowing conversation. It is likely the client will respond with a series of single word answers, and maintaining a conversational flow in the session will be difficult.

Some ways to reframe these questions so they are more open ended are:

- "Was that difficult for you?"
- "In what ways was that experience difficult for you?"
- "How many cones are you smoking per day?"
- "Can you tell me a bit about your pot use at the moment?"
- "When did this all start?"
- "How did this all start?"
- "That must have left you feeling sad"
- "Can you tell me about how that experience left you feeling?"
- "How are you going?"
- "How have your emotions been lately"
- "Did you find the place alright?"
- "How was your experience getting here today?"
- "Do you think you have a drinking problem?"
- "Can you tell me a bit about your drinking recently?"

Reflective Listening

Possibly the most important skill involved in Motivational Interviewing. Reflective listening is the shared act of understanding another person's ideas (not simply what they are saying, but what they are meaning by what they are saying), as well as being able to reflect this idea back to the person.

Reflective listening can be as simple as repeating back an element of what the person has said, possibly paraphrasing or using similar words as replacements:

- **Person 1:** "I hate that I leave my assignments till the last minute because I end up getting really stressed and the result often isn't very good"
- **Person 2:** "You tend to leave your assignments till the last minute, then you feel really stressed and the finished product isn't as good as you'd like it to be"

Or this can involve attempting to get to the true meaning or desire of the person:

- **Person 1:** "I hate that I leave my assignments till the last minute because I end up getting really stressed and the result often isn't very good"
- **Person 2:** "Your grades are important to you. You have a busy schedule and you would like to learn ways to better prioritize your school work to gain better results and avoid extra stress"

As we see in the second example, we have inferred what the person is actually wanting by sharing this sentence with us, even though they haven't specifically stated this.

Another example of reflective listening might be:

- **Person 1:** "I know other people get stressed too, but for some reason the only way I can deal with my stress is by smoking pot every night."
- **Person 2:** "You are experiencing stress in your life and have found that smoking cannabis relieves this stress in the moment for you, and you are also wanting to learn how other people deal with their stress so you have some alternatives available"

Here are some helpful pointers when preparing for using reflective listening:

1. Focus on the person and the conversation. Try to eliminate distractions
2. Embrace the persons thoughts, feelings and views. Without agreeing or disagreeing
3. Mirror the mood, emotional state and body language of the person. Look for congruence between verbal and non verbal. (I.e. does **what** the person says line up with **how** they are saying it. For example: someone angrily saying "everything is fine!")
4. Summarize the persons words. In your own words, attempt to reflect the true meaning of the words being spoken.
5. Stay on point, even if the other person is jumping around.
6. Remember to work these skills into conversation. Find your own language that feels natural to you.

TABLE 1.1. Levels of Reflection in Motivational Interviewing

| | Client statement | |
|-----------------|--|---|
| | <i>"Even though nothing has happened, I've been feeling more depressed lately."</i> | |
| | Definition | Example of response |
| Repeat | Repeating an element of what the speaker said. | <i>"You've been more depressed lately."</i> |
| Rephrase | Staying close to what the speaker has said with some rephrasing and synonyms | <i>"So your sadness is getting worse and you don't know why."</i> |
| Paraphrase | Inferring or guessing at the meaning of what the speaker has said and reflecting this back | <i>"You would like to understand why your mood changes like that."</i> |
| Reflect feeling | Emphasizing the emotional dimension through feeling statements and metaphors | <i>"It's scary not to be able to understand your depressed feelings."</i> |

Below is a table from Arkowitz, H (2008), *Motivational Interviewing in the Treatment of Psychological Problems* that highlights the various degrees we can go to with reflective listening.

Affirm

Affirm with the person's point of view. This is very different to **agreeing** with their point of view. The goal of affirming is simply to understand where the person is coming from. Even if the person is holding a particular view we don't agree with, we may even have a moral objection to what they are saying, it doesn't actually matter because we are not in a position to agree or disagree. We simply need to understand. By doing this we are far better placed to be able to influence their thinking and behavior than if we overtly disagree or argue with what they are saying. This is a sure-fire way of raising defenses and putting a stop to any empathy formation.

Summary Clarification

I like to think of these as extended reflections. These can be done a few times during a conversation and simply act as a summary of what has been spoken about so far. Be sure to include any inferences you have made through your reflections thus far, any emotional content as well as other details, and any learnings that the client may have experienced along the way. This can start as simply as:

- "So let me try and summarize what we've discussed so far, and you can tell me if I've understood properly"

Summary clarifications serve a few key purposes:

- They demonstrate to the person that we've been **listening**, and more importantly **hearing** what they have been saying
- They allow us to recap on key pieces of information so we can dedicate more attention to new information the client is sharing
- They allow us to reflect back in a more balanced way, rather than placing majority of the focus onto a particular event the client can't seem to get past
- They are also a great way of moving a conversation along if you reach a sticking point, or you feel the conversation is circling around a particular issue

CORE ELEMENT 2 - AVOID ARGUMENTS

The art of avoiding arguments in Motivational Interviewing can be a challenge, especially if the client is arguing against a behavior change that has obvious health and lifestyle benefits. The idea is that by engaging in arguments for a particular behavior, the client strengthens their feelings towards that behavior, however by meeting arguments with acceptance and curiosity, the client is able to safely explore alternative views and beliefs with the help of the therapist.

Arguments can be avoided in a number of ways. This can include meeting arguments with reflective statements:

- **Person 1:** "I know I should quit smoking, but I have far too much school stress to quite now. It's definitely not the right time."
- **Person 2:** "You have considered quitting smoking and feel this would be the right decision for you, and at the same time it is difficult to picture quitting now without other ways to manage your stress at school."

Arguments can also be met with affirming statements:

- **Person 1:** "I know I should quit smoking, but I have far too much school stress to quite now. It's definitely not the right time."
- **Person 2:** "You've got a lot on your plate at the moment with school, and it's causing you a good deal of stress".

We can see that both of these responses direct the client to consider another point of view, whilst retaining a feeling of validation and respect.

The alternative would be to meet this with an argument, which would ultimately lead to the client feeling unheard, invalidated, and unlikely to want to continue opening up with you:

- **Person 1:** "I know I should quit smoking, but I have far too much school stress to quite now. It's definitely not the right time."
- **Person 2:** "That doesn't make sense, they sound like excuses to me. If you know that quitting is the right thing to do, then surely now is the perfect time."

Arguments can be so easy to fall into. It is helpful, rather than rely on remembering techniques, to simply remember what our role is when it comes to supporting clients with Motivational Interviewing. Some of these tips include:

Your role IS NOT to...

- Convince the person to change
- Win the battle against bad decisions
- Assert your dominance over the irrational teenage mind
- Engage in opposition with the client in order for them to change their behaviour

Your role IS to...

- Be a sounding board
- Assist the person organize their thoughts/events/opinions
- Highlight and explore the discrepancy between what they **are** doing, and what they **would like** to be doing.
- Be 100% on their side... even if it's them vs. the world

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

- Arkowitz, H., Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (Eds.). (2015). *Motivational interviewing in the treatment of psychological problems*. Guilford Publications.
- Rollnick, S., & Miller, W. R. (1995). What is motivational interviewing?. *Behavioural and cognitive Psychotherapy*, 23(4), 325-334.