

# Motivational Interviewing (Motivational Conversation)

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## Overview

What is motivational interviewing?

A short definition: Motivational interviewing is a collaborative style of conversation designed to strengthen a person's motivation and commitment to change.

A technical definition: Motivational interviewing is a collaborative, directive style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting the person's reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion.

Motivational interviewing is considered in a thoughtful hierarchy with motivational interviewing spirit as the foundation, as the attitude of the worker.

## What makes Motivational Interviewing unique?

The spirit of motivational interviewing is its essence. Four things are key: partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evocation. It holds a deep belief that people are doing the best they can with the resources they have.

- Partnership: motivational interviewing is a partnership in which the person's experiences, perspectives, and expertise are respected. The practitioner provides an atmosphere that is conducive rather than coercive for change.
- Acceptance: the practitioner acknowledges the person's right to self-determination and facilitates informed choice. This includes a disinterest (not uninterested) in the outcome for the person. The practitioner is not attached to the outcome, but rather to supporting the person.
- Compassion: the practitioner's ability to sit with the suffering of the person they serve.
- Evocation: change is a naturally occurring process; most people make changes in their lives without professional help. Motivational interviewing presumes that the resources and motivation for change lie within each person we serve and that the practitioner assists in evoking the person's desire to change.

The general approach is one of quiet, respectful curiosity to learn how the person has gotten to where

they are now. This usually involves paying careful attention to the person's values so that they can be supported in living those values. Motivation to change emerges from the person's desire to live their values; it isn't something that the practitioner pumps in like fuel into a car. A better metaphor is one of guiding toward change. The change might be a particular goal, or it might be resolving ambivalence.

### **Ambivalence**

Ambivalence is the coexistence in a person of contradictory emotions or attitudes and the tension that arises as a consequence. This is a fairly normal state of affairs and is experience - sometimes briefly, sometimes for more extended periods of time - as a part of the process of change. Ambivalence is sometimes called the conceptual anchor of motivational interviewing.

*I need to but I don't want to.*

*I will one day, but not yet.*

*I'd like to but I can't.*

Ambivalence can and often does paralyze behavior or cause repeated vacillations (throwing cigarettes away in the morning and then fishing through the trash to find them that evening).

There is a self-correcting element to the human psyche so that, for the ambivalent person, if you provide the arguments for change, they will respond with the arguments for the status quo. The more unfortunate persons find themselves labeled 'resistant' for exhibiting this kind of behavior.

Motivational interviewing's approach to ambivalence is to explore it in a spirit of empathy and respectful curiosity.

### **How to engage in a motivational interviewing based conversation**

The Core skills of motivational interviewing: OARS

Open question, affirmations, empathic reflections, summaries

- Open questions (Dash of curiosity)
  - Explore the status quo: *What worries you about your current situation? In what ways does this concern you? What do you think will happen if you don't change anything?*
  - Elicit advantages of change, if you wanted: *How would you like things to be different? What would be the advantages of making a change? What would you like your life to look like in five years time?*
  - Express optimism about change: *What makes you think if you decided to make a change you could do it? Who could offer you help making this change? When else in your life*

*have you made a significant change? How did you do it?*

- Seek intention to change: *What would you be willing to try? Of the options I've mentioned, which sounds like the most appealing for you? What do you think you might do?*
- Great open questions are also open minded. If you are asking the question with the possibility of being surprised by the answer, you are on the right track.
- Affirmations
  - Affirmations include recognizing achievements and acknowledging difficulties. They may note a trait, attribution, or a strength; they may simply recognize a struggle the person is having. They validate the person's experience, build rapport, and encourage the person to use the strengths recognized. Helpful affirmations lock into the person's value system rather than the practitioner's; that is, they aren't generic compliments, but highly specific interventions tailored to the person in front of you.
  - Note that agreeing is also different from affirming, because there is a step away from the person's ideas toward those of the practitioner.
  - Aim to affirm 'away from the problem area': e.g., noting a person's achievements as a parent (in spite of difficulties with alcohol) to build self efficacy.
- Empathic Reflections
  - Simple reflection repeats back what the person has just said using their own words or a paraphrase. This should be more than parroting back to the person, the response should pass through you and be changed in some way.
  - Selective reflection repeats back some of what the person has said. Typically this should be what you perceive as the core issues (earlier on in the process) or change talk (later in the process).
  - Double-sided reflection reflects the last statement and a previous, contradictory statement that the person has made. You may be able to recast this in terms of a dilemma or ambivalence the person is experiencing, or build discrepancy by reflecting a value with a behavior.
  - Complex reflection involves reflecting back something more than just the words: typically affect but also meaning, values, strengths, or direction. This can be simply a statement (You look very happy when you talk about your wife.) but can be more sophisticated, for example by linking feelings to experiences and behaviors: you feel [accurately name the person's feeling] when [accurately name the experiences and behavior that gave rise to the feeling]. This is a formulaic approach. Once you have

gotten used to the idea of linking feelings with behavior and experiences, use your own words. As a general rule, err on the side of understating the emotional content when you reflect it..

- Summaries
  - Use an accentuated transition to announce that you are going to summarize where you have gotten to, e.g. *Let me see if I've got this right*. Go on to invite corrections/additions (open question), then perhaps use another open-ended question, e.g. So, where do you go from here?
  - Summary is also a great technique to use when you don't know what to say next.

### **Change Talk/Theory** (Meet people where they dream, with, hope.)

Motivational interviewing differs from client-centered counseling in that it is directional. The heart of the directionality is response to change talk/theory. This means that in motivational interviewing, one must have a clear idea of a 'focus' that is the topic for conversation.

Within motivational interviewing, there are tactics for moderating the internal struggle and sustain talk; and skills for eliciting and strengthening change talk and change theory.

- Recognizing change talk/change theory
  - The person expresses disadvantages of the status quo, advantages of change, optimism for change, or intention to change. There are five main types of change talk summarized by the DARN-ACT: Desire, Ability, Reasons, Need, Activation, Commitment, and Taking steps.
- Eliciting and enhancing change talk/theory
  - Ask for elaboration with open questions: *What? How? Tell me about that*. Follow your curiosity.
  - Affirm change talk/theory: *I can see you've thought carefully about this. I can see how important being a good mother is to you*. Affirmation may be the single most important intervention in eliciting more change talk.
  - Reflect change talk/theory: This should be selective, focused, and specific.
  - Summarize change talk: your summary might include the affect, the struggle with ambivalence, change talk/theory, maybe objective evidence of a problem (e.g. liver damage in a drinker).

- Sustain talk; counter-change statements
  - The person lists the advantages of the status quo or the advantage of change; or expresses intention not to change or pessimism about change. This is shame speaking and empathy is the antidote.
  - On the spectrum of discord, this is one step away from dissonance; the tactics are similar.
  - Use statements (try to use ‘continuing the paragraph’ to empathize, then move away from the aversive emotion and the sustain talk). Close reflections risk reinforcing the aversive response.
  - Emphasize personal choice, personal autonomy.

### **Language and relationship (Power with not power over)**

#### **Dissonance: resistance to change**

Sustain talk is part of the person’s ambivalence, and it isn’t interpersonal. If things aren’t going well, sustain talk can shift into dissonance, which is interpersonal: resistance has been called ‘ambivalence under pressure’. Internal conflict indicates an absence of collaboration: arguments, disagreements, friction, minimizing (*There is no problem.*). This struggle represents and predicts movement away from change. It is related to the concept of high expressed emotion which has been repeatedly shown to be associated with poor outcome and is a self-protective pattern for the person to protect them self from shame.

This internal duality often conceals feelings of embarrassment, shame, and guilt, and with that assumptions about how you fit into the person’s relational alliance. Behind anger is often fear of judgment, labelling, loss of freedom, or worries about your response to their situation. Remember that all judgment is a form of violence: it creates shame in the other person.

When suffering arises, change the approach and ‘roll with it’: use empathy.

- Use empathic reflections (especially complex reflections: follow the affect, amplify the values).
- Shift focus: move to the values.
- Apologize if appropriate: a true heartfelt apology.
- Emphasize personal choice and autonomy.
- Align with the status quo, no change: this creates a voice for the suffering.
- Agree with a twist: reflection with a reframing toward the values and core needs.

- The key message is that when the internal struggle arises, it is a signal for you, not the person, to do something different. Pushing against resistance and discord creates more of it.

### **The four processes of motivational interviewing (Compassion with direction)**

The processes are ‘somewhat linear’ in that engaging necessarily comes first and focusing (identifying a change goal, a wish) is a prerequisite for evoking the person’s own solutions. Planning is a logically later step. Yet they are also recursive in that engaging and re-engaging continues throughout the process. Sometimes engagement can happen very quickly and it can seem like the conversation moves rapidly to evoking and planning.

#### **Engaging**

Establish a compassionate working relationship, a working alliance, in order to create the psychological safety the person needs for help. The first task may be resolving ambivalence about ourselves, the practitioner. Although one asks about the presenting complaint, the real task for any person is often addressing their first unspoken dilemma: is this person (the practitioner) safe enough for me to trust with my vulnerabilities? Often, this dilemma appears as ambivalence about the relationship.

In a sense, although the content at this moment may be about change or ‘getting a history’, the task is particularly process focused: in getting to know the person be artfully vague and treat avoidances and ellipses on the person’s part as legitimate ways of protecting their sensitivities. If people are pushed for specifics too early, or asked too many questions, they protect themselves by misrepresenting themselves, which can then be hard to pull back from later.

During this phase of developing the working alliance, it is critical to use empathy and create a state of compassion.

Skills to use include asking about the person’s typical day. If you can, start away from the ‘presenting complaint’: *Before we do anything else, I’m curious to know what kind of person you are. Tell me about your passions in life, what are you good at, what do you do that you really enjoy, what makes you feel proud? What do you hope for from coming to counseling at this time?* Be very conscious of more empathy than questions.

#### **Focusing**

Introduction to focusing

The focusing phase is about finding a clear direction and intention when it might not be clear from the outset. What is the particular intention for change in this person? For some people, it may take many

weeks to get to this point: for some, you will be there in the first minute of the first session.

### Clear focus

If a person has decided they may need help, and has some ideas about what this might be, explore ambivalence. Be careful of moving rapidly to evoking change talk/theory. Occasionally, there may be clarity and you may sometimes need to shift to action.

### Agenda Setting

The traditional skill of agenda setting is probably better thought of as a two-stage process of agenda mapping and agenda navigation. Guiding is involved in both of these processes: i.e. your expertise is put at the service of the person's own interests, dreams, and values.

### Agenda Mapping

- First, map an agenda with the person by eliciting all the concerns they may wish to discuss, without beginning to discuss the individual items. A good question to start with is often something like: *How should we use our time today?* List the one or two items that you perceive as being important. Use empathic reflections to reframe ideas located in the person's character to locate them in their behaviour.
- Second, explore the agenda in broad general terms, particularly looking for the person's ideas about how the different items relate. Some useful questions are: *What themes have you noticed? If you were to say one thing was the root cause of all these different concerns, what ideas come to mind? If someone who really cares about you was describing you, how might they explain the connection between these different concerns?* This may help begin the process of winnowing down a large set of problems into one fundamental source. Try to keep an attitude of open minded curiosity about how issues relate: look deeper at the values and affirm the values.

### Agenda Navigation

You may need to help the person prioritize multiple goals. Sometimes it is worth encouraging the person towards a lesser but achievable goal first rather than a more important but challenging goal, think small. *OK, so we'll spend today looking at your housing as that's clearly your number one priority, and we'll leave looking at your drug use for another time.*

For example, when working with a chaotic, homeless person struggling with drug misuse, it may well be that the person is not able to address those issues in this care episode. Your job at this point may be to help get the person rehoused, engage with services in a less chaotic manner, and begin to address drug misuse. You may touch on trauma issues and not work on them in a systematic way. Further along, the priority may have shifted to trauma issues with the person's other drug problems in the background.

Skilled focus around the agenda using a guiding style can foreground issues that are clearly important (e.g. drug use) even when these are not initially prioritized by the person. Focusing around the agenda

can be an iterative process as the person comes to trust you (and may be prepared to talk more about issues initially rejected). In time, you may also see the sense in some of the person's priorities.

### Clarifying

Sometimes, a change isn't immediately apparent. Clarifying sometimes is a two step process, starting with neutral exploration and moving on to expand understanding.

In neutral exploration, explore the person's view, without changing anything, so as to create a common deep understanding of the starting point. The key interventions are simple reflections. In someone with a very polarized worldview, this may take some time: use lots of summaries and reflections (two simple for every one complex). If there is conflict, drop back to the task of establishing a working relationship, use simple reflections. Other skills to use include typical day and good things and less good things.

When expanding understanding, the task is to gently introduce alternative viewpoints. Discrepancy, ambivalence and internal conflict may all be part of the interaction with the person at this time because the person's perspective is challenged. Listen hard for the DARN-ACT statements pointing to change talk/theory. Often people get stuck because of a restricted understanding of the situation or a narrow repertoire of solutions. Use complex and metaphorical reflections. Use double-sided reflections, e.g. reflect ambivalence as an ability to see things in more than one way. Be willing to guess, be willing to be wrong. Prepare the ground for those not ready to change.

Skills to use include advantages to staying the same, advantages to change, looking backwards and forwards, using third party perspectives (e.g. *What does your wife make of all this? Other patients I've known in your position have thought x. How would you feel about that?*).

### **Evoking** (The capacity and potential for change is within every person)

This phase is where strategic focus becomes critical for the practitioner as you focus clearly and guide the person toward their particular goal.. Use summaries again to draw to a close. Summarize the person's perception of the struggle, perhaps acknowledging ambivalence and including acknowledgement of the positives in staying the same.

Motivation is driven by the ambivalence between a person's dreams and values and his or her present state. Clear intentions are an important part of creating change. People's core values may feed into both sides of their ambivalence, e.g. a clash between loyalty to drinking friends and loyalty to family. Nevertheless, explicitly recognizing the value at stake can help people move towards change. If these intentions seem misguided, stick with the person's intentions and core needs as much as possible. Try to relate the intentions to the person's broader life goals, guiding values, and core needs. If the goal seems unrealistic, consider using empathy to create a small step with open questions. *What is your next small step you are willing to take?*

The strategic and directional parts of motivational interviewing really come into play: the dash of curiosity, selective empathic responding, and selective empathic summaries. Elicit and reflect change

talk ('DARN-ACT'). *You said...What does that mean to you? How would you like things to turn out for you now, ideally? What happens next?*

Other skills to use: two futures (*What would your life be like in five years time if you made this change? If you didn't?*), Importance and confidence rulers, (or the three wishes/winning the lottery questions). Now can be a good time to normalize ambivalence; ambivalence is normal. Perhaps use a summary and invite the person to step outside him or her self: *When you look at yourself, what do you see? If you were giving yourself advice right now, what would say?*

**Planning** (Think small, aim low, go slow)

There are multiple approaches to planning. Try working with a menu of possible options each with good and bad points rather than working towards a perfect solution, so that the person can choose options rather than refute suggestions. Consider all of the change options. Brainstorm. This process should explicitly include outlandish ideas. The aim is to generate a good list of possibilities without prematurely evaluating them. If an option elicits a resistant response, reflect this and reiterate that this is only a creative list of options. Draw on the person's natural resources and strengths in making the list. Respond with reflective listening, emphasizing change talk, personal responsibility, freedom, choice. You may want to use a decisional balance exercise about different options. You can do this with your client or give it as homework.

Summarize the person's plans; consider drawing up a written change plan with bullet points of actions to be taken.

Try to elicit the person's commitment. Having drawn up the plan ask them if this is what they want to do. If they are ambivalent (if you hear 'yes, but' from the person.), you may have some work to do first. Don't push for commitment if it isn't there. Commitment can be enhanced by making it verbal or shared, making the ambivalence normal.

Valuing small changes is critical. Some people may come out with a plan to change. Others may only commit to thinking about change and coming back to talk some more. Both are positive steps warranting affirmation. Even a restricted, limited short term plan can help the person avoid high risk situations; and change tends to produce more change.

Short form tactics (Rapid engagement)

Information giving (ask - offer - ask)

When giving information first ask the person: '*what do you know about...*'; then ask permission to add more information; then give the information; and lastly check the person thinks of it. Do this by explicitly asking an open question: '*What do you think of that information?*'

Some guidelines:

- Try to elicit everything the person knows before you give information.
- Establish the person's preferences for information (amount, format)
- Always ask for permission before giving information. This means being prepared to be rebuffed if the person says no. Respect the 'No.' Occasionally you must give the information and don't want to ask permission (e.g. if the information is safety critical or if you are required by law to give it). In these cases, give the information but give the person permission to disregard it, e.g. *'I have to tell you about what the law says about drinking and driving. It's up to you what you do with the information I give you, and you may choose to ignore me altogether, and I have to tell you'*.

### Change rulers

Two dimensions of intrinsic motivation to change are importance and confidence. One approach to engaging people about the importance and confidence of a particular change is to use a ruler scale.

This gives you a structured way of getting information about where to focus your interventions. There is no point in working on confidence to change if this is high but importance is low, for example.

How important [how confident] would you say it is for you [to make this change]?

On a scale of one to ten, where would you put yourself?

0 ----- 1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9 ----- 10

Not at all Important

Extremely Important

Start by asking someone why they are the number they are and not the number one or two points below on the scale: this elicits self-affirmations. Go on to ask what it would take to shift one or two points up the scale: this elicits change talk.

Someone that is high in both confidence and importance is likely to be alienated by your continuing to try to explore their ambivalence. By this stage, it has begun to resolve and you need to shift to planning specific changes.

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Stephen is a member of the International Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT) since 2003. He is a MIA-STEP trainer (Motivational Interviewing Assessment; Supervisor Training Program) for the New England ATTC since 2007. Stephen has been Motivational Interviewing Treatment Integrity trained and has over 100 hours of training in Motivational Interviewing. Stephen provides coaching and training domestically and internationally (Singapore, Iceland, China, Canada, Holland, Sweden, Poland, Turkey & UK) for social service agencies, health-care providers, substance abuse counselors, recovery coach specialist, criminal justice, vocational rehabilitation and other groups on motivational interviewing, addiction, co-occurring disorders, counseling theory, "challenging" adolescents, supervision and ethics for care professionals, men's work and the power of group work, as well as supervising a coding/coaching laboratory and simulation lab and training for Motivational Interviewing.

Stephen is the proud father of Sebastian, and co-author of *Game Plan: A Man's Guide to Achieving Emotional Fitness*.