

What is Motivational Interviewing?

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication that helps people strengthen their own motivation and commitment to change.

MI focuses on evoking the client's reasons for change, not persuading, arguing, or "fixing."

Core Skills: OARS

O - Open Questions

Open questions invite more than yes/no answers. They encourage reflection, elaboration, and deeper conversation.

Examples:

- "What are some things you'd like in a future job?"
- "How have you handled challenges like this before?"

A - Affirmations

Affirmations recognize a client's strengths, efforts, or values. They are specific and grounded in what the client has shared.

Examples:

- "You've been really persistent, despite the setbacks."
- "It took courage to come in today and talk about this."

R - Reflections

Reflections are statements that show you are listening and understanding. You say back what you hear the client is thinking, feeling or meaning.

Examples:

- "You're feeling discouraged."
- "Even though you're tired of job searching, a part of you still wants things to improve."

S - Summaries

Summaries are longer reflections that pull together key points and connect themes. They help confirm shared understanding and often highlight change talk.

Example:

"So even though interviews make you anxious, you're motivated to find work. You've already updated your resume, and you're thinking about practicing with a friend to feel more prepared. Did I miss anything important?"

Using Reflections Starters

- So, you're saying that...
- You're feeling ...
- For you, it's a matter of....
- From your point of view...
- It sounds like...You are...
- I am hearing that...
- I would imagine you...
- Through your eyes, ...
- Your belief is that...
- Your concern is that...
- It seems to you that...
- The important thing, as you see it, is....

The MI Process

Engaging: Build a safe, respectful relationship where the client can explore difficult realities.

Focusing: Clarify what matters most to the client and agree on an agenda.

Evoking: Elicit the client's reasons for change and strengthen commitment.

Planning: Co-create a realistic plan the client is willing to try.

Change Talk: DARN

Change talk is a language that leans towards change. To listen for it, remember the acronym DARN:

D - Desire: Statements that express wanting a change (e.g. "I would like to get back to work.").

A - Ability: Statements about capability or confidence (e.g. "I could show up on time; I have done it before.").

R - Reason: Statements that explain benefits (e.g. "It would help me pay my bills").

N - Need: Statements that express urgency or importance (e.g. "I need to find work soon").

Open Questions to Elicit Change Talk

Desire: “How would you like things to be different? Why would you want to make this change?”

Ability: “If you decided to do this, how would you set yourself to succeed? “What strengths or abilities do you have that could help?”

Reason: “What would you say are the best reasons for you to do this?”

Need: Why is this important right now?” What makes it feel necessary?”

Responding to Change Talk: EARS

When you hear change talk, respond with EARS acronym:

E - Elaborate: Ask for details or examples (e.g., “In what ways?” “How would you do that?”).

A - Affirm: Reinforce strengths and effort connected to change.

R - Reflect: Reflect the change talk back to strengthen it.

S - Summarize: Gather what you heard, like collecting flowers into a bouquet.

References

- Miller, William R., and Stephen Rollnick. *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*. 4th ed., Guilford Press, 2023.
- Sipler, Ed, et al., compilers. *A Pocket Guide to Motivational Interviewing*. South Eastern Trust (Northern Ireland), 2016, Building Better Programs, https://www.buildingbetterprograms.org/wpcontent/uploads/2016/03/mi_pocket_guide.pdf

Scaling Questions

Scaling questions help clients explore readiness and identify next steps.

Example:

“On a scale of 1-10, where 0 is not at all important and 10 is the most important thing in your life right now, how important is for you to make this change?”

Follow-ups (to strengthen change talk):

- “Why a 4 rather than a 0? (evokes reasons for change)
- “What would help you move from a 4 to a 5? (evokes strategies and supports)