

Learning Motivational Interviewing

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Thirty years ago, training in Motivational Interviewing (MI) and the field of Implementation Science were both in their infancy. Over time, significant progress has been made in understanding what it takes to adopt and sustain evidence-based practices in everyday work (Bauer & Kirchner, 2020), including MI specifically (Schwalbe et al., 2014). What has remained less clear is how practitioners move from general proficiency to genuinely nuanced, skillful practice — the kind where the approach is woven into how you are with people, not just what you do with them.

This page describes several approaches to building MI skills, from initial learning to advanced development, with particular attention to the Self-Practice/Self-Reflection (SP/SR) approach as a method for deepening understanding of MI's underlying principles.

Getting Started: Building the Foundation

Most people begin learning MI through a combination of reading, workshops, and practice. There are good resources at each level — introductory books, structured workbooks, brief online courses, and multi-day trainings — and the best starting point depends on the learner's context and goals.

The core knowledge base of MI includes understanding MI Spirit, the four zones of engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning, the five foundational skills (OARS+I), and client language — particularly how to recognize and work with change talk, sustain talk, and discord. These concepts can be introduced in a day or two, but that introduction is just the beginning. As any experienced practitioner will tell you, knowing the map and navigating the river are two different things.

Useful resources for building this foundation include:

- Rosengren, D. B. (forthcoming). *Building motivational interviewing skills: A practitioner workbook* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Rosengren, D. B. (2018). *Building motivational interviewing skills: A practitioner workbook* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
- Frey, J., & Hall, A. (2021). *Motivational interviewing for mental health clinicians: A toolkit for skills enhancement*. PESI Publishing.
- Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2023). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change and grow* (4th ed.). Guilford Press.

Developing Nuanced Practice

As practitioners gain competence in MI's foundational knowledge and skills, a common next question emerges: how do I move beyond applying techniques to actually embodying

the approach? This shift — from knowing what to do to understanding when, why, and how to do it with this person, in this moment — is where nuanced practice lives.

Several approaches can support this development.

Supervision and coaching provide feedback on real practice, including recorded sessions. Seeing and hearing oneself through the eyes of a skilled observer accelerates learning in ways that self-assessment alone rarely does.

Deliberate practice (Manuel et al., 2022) involves identifying a specific area of conscious incompetence, practicing with focused attention, reviewing performance immediately, making targeted refinements, and repeating until the skill can be deployed automatically. The goal is what learning researchers call *unconscious competence* — deploying skills naturally, without needing to consciously construct each move.

AI-assisted tools, including conversation simulations and structured feedback systems, are an emerging and growing part of the MI learning landscape.

Learning from the Inside Out: The SP/SR Approach

One of the most distinctive approaches to deepening MI practice is the Self-Practice/Self-Reflection (SP/SR) method, developed originally by James Bennett-Levy in the context of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy training and subsequently adapted for MI by Rosengren, Johnston, and Hilton (2025).

The central insight behind SP/SR is straightforward but easy to overlook: practitioners bring two selves to their work — a *personal self* and a *professional self*. Traditional training approaches, including deliberate practice, focus primarily on the professional self — the acquisition and refinement of skills. Personal therapy, by contrast, focuses on the personal self without necessarily connecting what is learned back to clinical practice. SP/SR aims to deepen the personal self's understanding and then build a bridge from that experience into the professional self. This is what makes it *inside-out* learning.

The Personal Practice Model (PPM), described by Bennett-Levy and Finlay-Jones (2018), provides the conceptual framework. [See figure below.]

The SP/SR Process with MI

SP/SR with MI involves working through a personal challenge or professional difficulty by engaging with it as a client would in an MI conversation — using MI concepts, principles, and skills as the framework. The challenge chosen should be real but bounded: on a difficulty scale from 0 to 100, the recommended range is 30 to 70. Not so easy that nothing is at stake; not so difficult that the process is destabilizing.

This work is then accompanied by structured self-reflection and writing — connecting what was experienced as a client to one's understanding and use of MI as a practitioner. Through this process, practitioners experience the value of specific elements of MI — the weight of a well-placed reflection, the power of an affirmation to shift one's sense of

possibility, what it feels like when someone really listens — and carry those experiences forward into their work.

There is an order to this. Participants build foundational knowledge and at least basic skills before beginning SP/SR. Once that base is in place, the SP/SR process adds something that reading and skill practice alone cannot: a felt sense of what MI is like from the inside, and a clearer sense of why it matters.

Limited practice partnership and group reflection. SP/SR can be done individually, but Rosengren, Johnston, and Hilton (2025) encourage practitioners to engage it in a *limited practice partnership* — a structured, boundaried pairing in which one person takes the role of practitioner and the other takes the role of client around a real but limited issue. Bennett-Levy and Lee (2014) note the added value of sharing reflections in a group context: participants can discuss the *process* of the MI experience publicly while maintaining privacy around the *content*. For example, someone might share how a forward-focused question helped them see past an obstacle, without disclosing the specifics of what that obstacle was. This sharing — whether in person, virtually, or through written posts — deepens understanding, enriches both selves, and builds community among learners.

Who Benefits from SP/SR?

SP/SR is not just for advanced practitioners. Learners at all levels can draw real value from the inside-out approach. That said, deeper prior knowledge of MI concepts and skills allows practitioners to draw richer and more transferable learning from the experience. For those still building their foundational knowledge, the combination of structured learning plus SP/SR produces something neither approach produces alone.

What the Research Shows

SP/SR originated in CBT training, and most of the research base comes from that context, with findings primarily from qualitative methods (Chigwedere et al., 2021). A recent study by Scott and colleagues (2021) used comparison groups and found that SP/SR produced greater therapist confidence and less burnout than traditional CBT training approaches. The approach has since been extended to Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Tirch et al., 2019), Schema Therapy (Farrell & Shaw, 2018), Compassion Focused Therapy (Kolts et al., 2018), and now MI (Rosengren et al., 2025). Research on SP/SR in MI is still in its early stages, but the convergence of evidence from adjacent fields is encouraging.

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Figure 1. The Personal Practice Model of MI



Rosengren, Johnston, & Hilton (2025)