

Motivational Interviewing: An Overview of Concepts and Skills

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Over the last four decades, our understanding of the *why* of change has broadened and deepened. Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a way of talking with people that capitalizes on these insights — helping clients figure out *their* own reasons for changing, rather than having those reasons supplied by someone else.

In *Motivational Interviewing* (4th Edition), Miller and Rollnick (2023) offer a definition that captures the essence well:

MI is a particular way of talking with people about change that evokes and strengthens their own motivation and commitment (p. 3).

Notice what this does and doesn't say. MI takes something we already do — talk to people — and specifies that when done in a particular way, it can lead to meaningful change. That *particular way* has two sides: what we do (a technical element) and how we do it (a relational element). Both are necessary. Neither is sufficient alone.

The Relational Side: MI Spirit

The *how* of MI begins with spirit — the underlying heartset and mindset that practitioners bring to their work. MI Spirit has four elements: *partnership*, *acceptance*, *compassion*, and *envisioning*.

Partnership recognizes that both people in the conversation bring expertise. The client knows their own life; the practitioner knows something about the change process. Both sides need to engage for the helping relationship to work.

Acceptance, drawing on Carl Rogers, contains four elements: recognizing the absolute worth of the person, honoring their autonomy in decision-making, offering accurate empathy in response to what they share, and affirming their capacity to change.

Compassion goes beyond general care and concern. It means actively prioritizing this individual's welfare — working in their interest, not ours.

Envisioning is the fourth element. While Miller and Rollnick (2023) use the term *empowerment*, I prefer *envisioning* because it better captures what we are actually doing: helping clients see the possibilities before them and take ownership of the path forward (Rosengren et al., 2025). This happens largely by drawing out ideas and solutions that already exist within the client, rather than importing them from the outside. This spirit suffuses all the techniques and conversations of MI.

The Structural Side: Four Zones

Miller and Rollnick (2023) describe four tasks to guide the process of MI: *engaging*, *focusing*, *evoking*, and *planning*. In *Building Motivational Interviewing Skills* (3rd ed., forthcoming), I suggest these are better understood as *zones* — a term that captures their fluid, overlapping, non-linear character more accurately than “tasks” or “steps” would. We move back and forth between zones within and across conversations, guided by where the client is, not by a predetermined sequence.

Engaging is establishing a safe, comfortable space within which the client can explore the challenges in their life — and begin to consider how things might be different. It also involves starting to understand the bigger picture of the client’s situation and opening the first glimpses of possibility.

Focusing means coming to understand what matters most to this person right now, and developing a shared direction for the work. The client’s priorities shift across sessions, so this is an ongoing orientation rather than a one-time agenda-setting exercise.

Evoking means calling forth the client’s own reasons for change — what MI refers to as *change talk* — and strengthening them. This is not the practitioner making the case for change; it is drawing out the case that already exists within the client.

Planning is working together to shape a concrete plan once the client is ready to move — building commitment and identifying the specific steps that will carry the change forward.

These zones provide both a map and a compass. They help us understand not just what to do, but when to do it and why — and how our approach needs to shift as the conversation unfolds.

The Technical Side: OARS+I

On the *what* side of MI are five foundational skills, summarized as **OARS+I**.

Open questions invite reflection rather than yes/no answers. The goal is not to gather information efficiently but to open space for the client to explore their own thinking. Becoming more intentional about the form of a question — and what territory it opens — is one of the first things MI asks of practitioners.

Affirmations draw attention to strengths and capabilities that already exist within the client. Done well, this is quite different from cheerleading or praise; it is a specific act of noticing and naming what is real and present. Affirmations connect directly to the spirit of envisioning — helping clients see themselves as capable of change.

Reflections are the backbone of MI. They require practitioners not just to say they understand, but to demonstrate it — to go below the surface of what clients say and reflect back some of the thoughts, feelings, beliefs, or attitudes that lie beneath. We sometimes use the image of an iceberg: what is visible on the surface is only a portion of what is present, and the most powerful reflections often touch what is below.

Summaries are an extension of reflections. They gather what the client has said and organize it in a way that is useful — giving appropriate weight to what supports the possibility of change, and pulling together the threads of the conversation in a way that helps clients hear themselves.

Information sharing is often a core part of practitioner work, but MI approaches it differently than a simple advice-giving model. The principle is to offer information rather than impose it, to ask before sharing, to provide it in a menu rather than a single prescription, and to use an ask–provide–ask approach: find out what the person already knows, offer targeted information, then invite their response to it.

Client Language: Change Talk, Sustain Talk, and Discord

The most distinctive element of MI is its attention to what clients say — specifically, to the type of language they use about change. Research consistently shows that this matters: the kind of language a client engages in predicts whether they will change, and the behavior of the practitioner influences which kind of language clients produce.

Change talk refers to client speech in favor of change — statements of desire, ability, reason, need, or commitment. A central aim of MI is to help clients articulate their own reasons for changing, increase the frequency of this kind of talk, and in doing so, strengthen their own motivation.

Sustain talk refers to speech in favor of the status quo — arguments for not changing, or for staying where things are. This is not resistance to be overcome; it reflects real ambivalence, which is a normal part of difficult change. The practitioner’s job is to hear it without reinforcing it or arguing against it.

Discord is something different — it is friction in the relationship itself. When practitioners press too hard or slip into the *fixing reflex* (the natural impulse to solve problems for people), clients push back. Discord signals that the relationship needs attention before the content of change can move forward.

Understanding these three types of client language — and having techniques for recognizing, responding to, and differentially evoking each — is at the heart of competent MI practice. The research is clear: practitioner behavior influences what clients say, and what clients say influences whether they change.

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