


Motivational Interviewing (MI) Foundations Quick Reference Guide

 *A practical guide for Peer Support Specialists*


What is Motivational Interviewing (MI)?

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a **collaborative, person-centered communication style** that helps individuals **explore and resolve ambivalence about change**. It is designed to strengthen **a peer's own motivation and commitment to change**, rather than persuading them to take action.

 **Key Insight:** People are more likely to change when they discover their **own reasons** for doing so, rather than being told what to do.

The Four Core Principles of MI

- ✓ **Collaboration** – Working as a **partner, not an expert**. The conversation is guided, not controlled.
- ✓ **Autonomy** – The peer is in charge of their decisions; change must come from them.
- ✓ **Acceptance** – Creating a **non-judgmental space** where the peer feels heard and valued.
- ✓ **Empathy** – Understanding the peer's perspective and validating their experience.

 **Pro Tip:** Peer support is built on **trust and respect**—using these principles will help peers feel more open and engaged.

Key MI Techniques – OARS

OARS is a set of skills used to facilitate meaningful conversations:

- ✓ **Open-Ended Questions** – Encourage deeper exploration.
- ✓ **Affirmations** – Recognize strengths and efforts.

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- ✓ **Reflective Listening** – Demonstrate understanding and build trust.
- ✓ **Summaries** – Reinforce key points and keep the conversation focused.

◆ **Example of OARS in Action:**

◆ *Peer:* “I want to get sober, but I don’t think I can do it.”

◆ *Facilitator:*

- **(O)** “What makes you feel unsure about it?”
- **(A)** “You’ve already taken an important step by thinking about change.”
- **(R)** “It sounds like you want sobriety, but it feels overwhelming.”
- **(S)** “You’re thinking about getting sober, but you’re unsure if it’s possible—let’s talk more about that.”

💡 **Pro Tip:** OARS helps create **conversations that feel supportive and empowering**, rather than directive.

The Four Processes of MI

- ✓ **Engaging** – Building a trusting, respectful relationship.
- ✓ **Focusing** – Identifying a meaningful goal for the peer.
- ✓ **Evoking** – Drawing out the peer’s own motivation for change.
- ✓ **Planning** – Supporting commitment and creating an action plan.

💡 **Pro Tip:** If a peer is not ready for change, focus on **Engaging and Focusing**—pushing too quickly into Planning can increase resistance.

Recognizing Change Talk vs. Sustain Talk


✓ **Change Talk** – Signals readiness for change:

- “I want to get healthier.”
- “I know I need to stop using.”
- “I think I could do it if I had support.”

✓ **Sustain Talk** – Signals hesitation or resistance:

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- “I’ve always been this way.”
- “I don’t think I can change.”
- “Nothing ever works for me.”

 **Pro Tip:** When you hear **Change Talk**, **reinforce it!** “You said you want to get healthier—what would that look like for you?”


Avoiding the Righting Reflex

The **Righting Reflex** is the urge to **correct or persuade a peer to change**—but this often increases resistance. Instead, use:

✓ **Reflections** – “It sounds like part of you wants to change, but another part is unsure.”

✓ **Open-ended questions** – “What would have to be different for you to feel ready for change?”

✓ **Affirmations** – “It’s great that you’re thinking about your options.”

 **Pro Tip:** The less you **push**, the more likely the peer is to explore change **on their own**.

Quick MI Conversation Guide

◆ When a peer is not ready for change:

- Focus on **engagement and active listening**.
- Reflect their feelings: “It sounds like you’re feeling stuck.”
- Avoid pushing solutions—let them explore their own thoughts.

◆ When a peer is ambivalent:

- Acknowledge both sides: “Part of you wants to change, but another part is hesitant.”
- Ask about **pros and cons** of change.
- Reinforce any **change talk** they express.

◆ When a peer is ready for change:

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- Ask: “What’s the first step that feels manageable for you?”
- Use **SMART goals** to create an achievable plan.
- Reinforce their confidence: “You’ve put a lot of thought into this—it sounds like you’re ready.”

💡 **Final Pro Tip:** MI is **not about getting people to change**—it’s about helping them **find their own reasons and confidence to do so.**

Next Steps

- ✓ **Practice using OARS in conversations**—the more you use it, the more natural it becomes.
- ✓ **Listen for Change Talk and reinforce it** to encourage progress.
- ✓ **Avoid the Righting Reflex**—guide rather than direct.
- ✓ **Use MI principles in everyday interactions** to strengthen your skills.

🎯 **Keep this guide handy as a quick reference when practicing MI!**