



Motivational Interviewing for People with Developmental Disabilities

Overview

Motivational interviewing (MI) is a collaborative process that helps a person strengthen his or her intrinsic motivation and commitment to change.⁴ This technique was originally created for mental health therapists in the addiction treatment field, but it is now used for a variety of physical and mental health issues.^{2,3,5,6} Though MI has been traditionally done by mental health professionals, it can be a helpful tool for helping professionals in various fields that have conversations with clients about change.⁴ For people with developmental disabilities (DD), MI can be used by direct service providers, health care workers and/or therapists to help them make positive changes in their lives and increase their motivation to participate in the physical and mental health treatments they need.¹ The processes of MI include engaging, focusing, evoking and planning.⁴ These processes can be successfully adapted for people with DD as needed.¹

Engaging

The first process of MI is engaging. Engaging is the process by which the professional creates a trusting and respectful relationship with the client.⁴ In order for MI to be a helpful and collaborative process, the client must feel safe and comfortable being vulnerable and sharing his or her thoughts and feelings. To establish this safety, a relationship must be built in which the professional demonstrates authenticity, confidentiality, genuine interest, compassion, and empathy. The professional must also take care to show that he or she is interested in and cares about the client's well-being as a whole and is not just hyper focused on his or her own

agenda. The relationship that is established in the beginning of the process will set an important foundation for the remaining steps.¹

Focusing

The next process is focusing, which is the process of identifying which changes the client needs to make and which direction to move in. Sometimes the client and professional have the same ideas about possible areas of change, however, sometimes their expectations and ideas might conflict with one another.⁴ Throughout the process, it is vital that professionals foster respect and autonomy for the client. People with DD might especially feel a lack of autonomy because they may need a little extra assistance with some tasks, or they may have people in their lives who try to make decisions for them. It is especially important for providers to help all clients recognize and exercise their own autonomy by taking them seriously, letting them have a say in what is discussed during the consultation process, and respecting their choices.¹ Overall, professionals should take care to respect the client's wishes and go at the client's pace to establish a common purpose with the client.⁴ When an agreement is made about the topics of discussion, it is vital that the professional is very clear about the goals and expectations that are being set, so that the client knows and understands what the rest of the process entails.¹

Evoking

After one or more areas of change are chosen as the focus, professionals must help the client evoke their own motivations for change which is the main process of MI. Rather than simply

telling the person what he or she needs to change, professionals must help the person voice his or her own motivations for change so that the motivation is coming from an internal source. It is the professional's job to help the client think through these matters by asking questions such as "What might be some good things about making this change?" or "What are some of the bad things about how things are right now?"⁴

Below are some suggestions from Frielink and Embregts¹ on how to ask effective questions that evoke change promoting responses for people with DD:

- Adapt to the language level of the client and use the client's own wording
- Use concrete, clear and simple language
- Use short sentences
- Focus the question on a specific topic
- Start questions with query words
- Avoid starting a question with the word "why", as this word can imply that the client needs to account for something which can elicit negative emotions
- Ask only one question at a time
- Provide ample time for the person to respond to each question
- Ask every question only once
- If the client does not understand the question, try to rephrase it or explain it in a different way by using pictures, videos or role plays
- If the client is having a difficult time answering, give him or her possible answers to choose from
- Constantly test for understanding, as it might be difficult for the client to admit that he or she does not understand
- Help clients verbalize their thoughts and feelings
- Help clients with the organization and structure of their language if they get lost in the sentence or forget
- Summarize what was discussed before changing topics

- Help clients imagine hypothetical situations, or if the client is having difficulty, only talk about concrete reality
- Assist clients in making connections between advantages and disadvantages of change

Planning

At a certain point in the process, people's motivation reaches a certain point where they would like to talk more about when and how to make the necessary change rather than whether and why. The professional should not force the person to advance to this step, rather, the professional's job is to follow the client's lead by noticing when the client has naturally progressed to this step. When the person's motivation progresses to this point, the client often has ideas about ways to make these necessary changes. It is important that the professional continue to respect the client's autonomy at this point in the process and support the next steps that the person wants to take.⁴ When making plans, it might be helpful to write the plans down for the client so that the steps are clear. As clients start to make progress on their plan, it is helpful to give them affirmations to let them know they are moving in the right direction. Professionals should be careful, however, to avoid exaggerating the affirmations or giving the same affirmation multiple times, as this can feel patronizing.¹ During this last step of planning, the professional can help the person as little or as much as needed in carrying out his or her plan for change, while continuing to have change evoking and affirming conversations.⁴

Conclusion

This fact sheet provides helpful skills that can be used by direct service providers, health care workers and/or therapists to help increase motivation for change in people with DD. These professionals likely encounter situations in

which they need to discuss changes that their clients or patients need to make. The four processes of MI: engaging, focusing, evoking and planning, are useful techniques to use to facilitate these important change evoking conversations. Eliciting intrinsic motivation with these processes can create the foundation that people need in order to take the next steps to make positive changes in their lives.

Contributors

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