

Motivational Interviewing Tips for Engaging with Youth

“*Motivational interviewing (MI) is a collaborative conversation style for strengthening a person’s own motivation and commitment to change.*”
— W. MILLER & S. ROLLNICK, 2013¹

MI is an evidence-based approach for having a collaborative dialogue with a person based on their readiness for change. Gaining proficiency in MI is often compared to the process of learning to play the piano. It takes ongoing practice and commitment to learning and evolving the skills over time. This resource highlights some tenets of motivation along with starter scripts to infuse MI into conversations with youth exploring change.

MI SPIRIT

The “spirit” of motivational interviewing is the way in which we bring ourselves, our style and our approach to interactions with youth. Perhaps even more important than the words we say, the spirit is the foundation. It’s in our ability to show **compassion**, striving for **partnership**, staying curious through **evocation** and believing in the young person with **acceptance**. A commitment to the spirit requires ongoing self-awareness, humility and perspective seeking.

COMPASSION is the prime directive of focusing on the other person’s wellbeing and it is essential for MI.

PARTNERSHIP is collaboration and power sharing. It is acknowledging you and the youth both have experience that can contribute to the conversation. Together you both bring value.

ACCEPTANCE is recognizing the worth of the other person; their autonomy, ability and need to choose. When the other person experiences more control, it usually results in less pushback.

EVOCATION is eliciting and drawing out the other person’s experience. Maintaining empathic curiosity allows the young person’s own ideas to surface.

EXAMPLES — CONVEYING THE MI SPIRIT

- Even with all the negative consequences of vaping, a lot of young people still do it. If you decided to delay using, what would be the benefits for you? **(COMPASSION, ACCEPTANCE)**
- I'd like to take a few minutes to have a conversation about alcohol and other drugs, is that OK with you? **(EVOCATION, ACCEPTANCE)**
- Your insights and input are valuable. If I have ideas I'll ask if you want to hear them, and together we will come up with a path forward. **(COMPASSION, PARTNERSHIP)**

OPEN-ENDED INQUIRY

Questions that are open-ended invite engagement rather than passivity. They may start with “what,” “how” or “tell me” rather than “did you” or “will you.” While closed questions can be helpful for gathering information, open-ended inquiry is more intentional and evocative, giving an opportunity for youth to pause, consider and explore what they think or feel.

EXAMPLES — OPEN-ENDED INQUIRY TO ENGAGE YOUTH IN CONVERSATION

- What keeps you going?
- Describe what you do to take care of yourself.
- If you were to do one thing for your own health, what could that look like?
- If there was a bright spot from this pandemic, what would it be for you?
- What is something you would tell your future 30-year-old self about this time in your life?
- What is one piece of advice you would give to a young person struggling with their mental health right now?
- In what ways have you approached and worked through significant challenges in your life?



WORKING WITH AMBIVALENCE

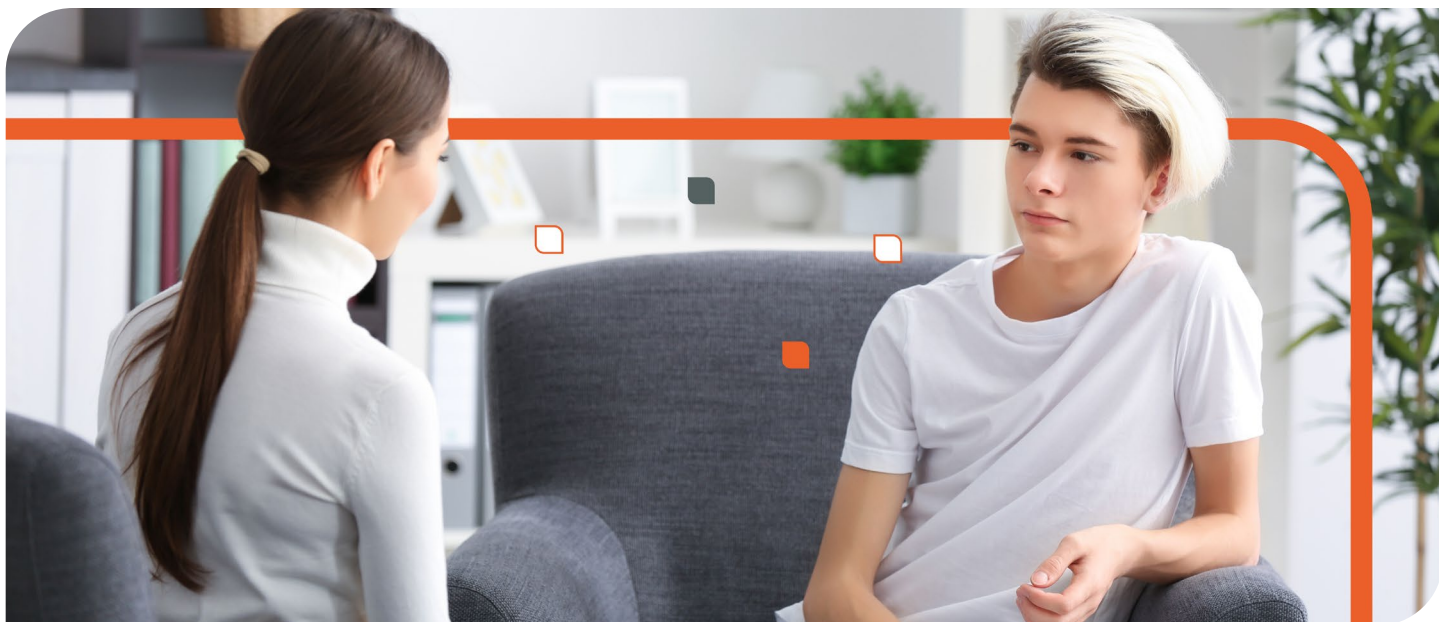
It's common for youth to be conflicted about substance use. They may be curious, but also worried about getting caught. They might want to numb or escape painful feelings or experiences, but are also aware of the dangers of addiction. When someone feels two ways about an issue it is usually counterproductive to take one side over the other. The person will likely be defensive and push back because autonomy and trust are threatened. Instead of telling the young person which side to choose, offer a reflection. By acknowledging both sides of the ambivalence you are holding up a mirror, without judgement. The youth already has the argument within them for and against change.

AMBIVALENT STATEMENT	 EXAMPLE REFLECTION
Lots of people smoke weed without any problems, so I'm not sure if I believe it's a gateway drug.	On the one hand, some people don't seem to experience problems with it, and on the other hand , it's possible some people will move to stronger stuff when the weed just doesn't hit hard anymore.
I don't use anything now, but who's to say I won't try something down the road.	It's possible you'll try something at some point, and given where your life is right now, you have reasons to pass.
My parents are super strict with me, but they were big partiers back in the day so it's pretty hypocritical.	The tight rules seem somewhat phony coming from your parents, and their rationale seems to be coming from something they've seen or done that's caused them to be strict with you.

CHANGE TALK

Motivational Interviewing also involves recognizing "change talk," which is when the other person uses words or phrases that favor change. Types of change talk can be remembered with the acronym "DARN CAT." Sometimes change talk is subtle, or we don't pick up on it because we are thinking about the next thing to say, or are focused on wanting to hear from the youth a bigger (and maybe unrealistic) end goal. Respond to change talk with an open-ended inquiry or a reflection. Continue to demonstrate compassion, partnership, evoking and autonomy. The more a person hears themselves expressing change language the more their own motivation is enhanced.

D ESIRE	<i>I want to be the first in my family to go to college.</i>
A BILITY	<i>I can deal with my friends who try to pressure me.</i>
R EASON	<i>Sometimes I'm tempted to just take a hit, but if I got caught, I'd lose my spot on the team.</i>
N EEED	<i>I need to take care of my baby sister.</i>
C OMMITMENT	<i>We all signed a pledge not to use while we were on the group camping trip.</i>
A CTIVATION	<i>I don't want to be here, but I came anyway.</i>
T AKING STEPS	<i>My brother can't come into my room and tell me to vape with him because I have a lock on the door now.</i>



“ *Motivational interviewing appears to be a good fit with adolescents’ developmental need to exert their independence and make decisions for themselves, while it respects their heightened levels of psychological reactance and coincides with the development of their decision-making skills.* — **E. BARNETT, ET AL., 2012²** ”

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING, CHECK OUT THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES:

- [Guidance for Delivering a Brief Intervention](#)
- [Conversation Guide for Delivering a Trauma-Informed Brief Intervention](#)
- [Readiness Ruler](#)
- [Motivational Interviewing Reminder Card](#)
- [TIP 35: Enhancing Motivation for Change in Substance Use Disorder Treatment](#)
- [Stages of Change Matching Guide](#)

REFERENCES

- ¹ Miller WR, Rollnick S. Motivational interviewing: helping people change, 3rd ed. New York, NY: Guilford Press; 2013.
- ² Elizabeth Barnett, M.S.W.a, Steve Sussman, Ph.D., FAAHB, FAPAA,b, Caitlin Smith, M.A.b, Louise A. Rohrbach, Ph.D.a, and Donna Spruijt-Metz, Ph.D. Motivational Interviewing for Adolescent Substance Use: A Review of the Literature. *Addict Behav.* 2012 December ; 37(12): 1325-1334.

This project is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$2,000,000 with 100% funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by CDC/HHS or the U.S. Government.