

Motivational Interviewing (MI)

As defined by its developers, "Motivational Interviewing is a directive, client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients to explore and resolve ambivalence." It was originally designed as a counseling approach for alcohol abuse counselors. However, you can apply the principles in other settings, including WorkFirst.

MI is non-judgmental and non-confrontational. It recognizes that people are at different levels when it comes to making changes in their lives. Professionals listen, probe, reflect, and clarify in ways that help parents strengthen their readiness to change and create a customer-centered, respectful atmosphere.

Following are two examples of how ambivalence might appear in a WorkFirst setting.

1. Research tells us that "deep down," most people who depend on public assistance would rather be in a different situation. However, the thought of becoming self-sufficient can be frightening, so they are reluctant to leave the system. They may have developed an identity as a "welfare recipient," rather than as a productive, self-sufficient worker. They feel torn between staying with the familiar and taking a risk by moving on with their lives.
2. A WorkFirst parent may know deep inside that her children will be better off if she gets a job and leaves public assistance. At the same time, the parent may believe that good parents never leave their children in the care of strangers. Attempts to convince this person that good parents often use child care services will only increase their ambivalence. As professionals, we often call this resistance.

The four principles of Motivational Interviewing are:

1. **Express empathy:** Listen to parents and get an idea of their concerns and their reasons for behaving as they do. Put yourself in their place. If you were in their shoes, what would you be thinking? How would you be feeling? How would you want someone to respond to you?
2. **Point out discrepancies** between how parents would like things to be and how they are now. Example:

You've said that you don't like the current situation where people are always snooping into your business. At the same time, you seem to find it hard to participate in programs that will help you get out of it. What do you think is going on?

3. **Expect resistance** and learn to roll with it. Arguing with a parent, or creating a power struggle by trying to assert control, can make matters worse. Think about the situation in terms of ambivalence and readiness to change, rather than as resistance.
4. **Support parent self-efficacy.** Help parents believe that they can achieve self-sufficiency and are capable of making the changes necessary to improve their lives.

Other things to consider in Motivational Interviewing:

- Identify and mobilize the parents' values and goals to fuel behavior change. Trying to pursue or force changes increases resistance and lowers the chance of change.
- Help parents talk about the conflict between two courses of action. Then work with the parent to choose the best course for them.
- MI can seem slow and passive. However, pushing people to change before they are ready does not produce the long-term results you want.
- Readiness to change comes about through interaction with others who can help parents talk about their goals and values.
- WorkFirst professionals should relate to the WorkFirst parent as a partner or companion.
- Motivational Interviewing is more about interpersonal style and increasing a parent's readiness for change, than it is about a set of skills or techniques to use.

For more information on Motivational Interviewing and WorkFirst, contact Cal Crow at the Center for Learning Connections, ccrow@highline.edu or 206-870-3783.

You can also Google Motivational Interviewing on the Web and find many more resources.