



The spirit of motivational interviewing

There are two implied active ingredients in motivational interviewing – a relational component and a technical component. The spirit of motivational interviewing is concerned with this relational aspect. Miller and Rollnick (2012) comment on how they have, since the first publication of their book in motivational interviewing in 1991, placed less emphasis on techniques of motivational interviewing and ever greater emphasis on the fundamental spirit that underlies it.

So, motivational interviewing, while a learnable set of techniques, is more importantly a style or approach to assisting clients in resolving ambivalence and changing behaviour. Without the underlying spirit of motivational interviewing, it risks becoming a vehicle for client compliance with little long-term change.

The spirit of motivational interviewing owes much to the Rogerian person-centred counselling approach. Miller argues that 80% of motivational interviewing is about this (presentation 18 July 2007, Wellington). The key difference is that motivational interviewing is more focussed and goal-directed than non-directive person-centred counselling. Motivational interviewing has, as its central purpose, the examination and resolution of ambivalence, and the key worker is intentionally directional in pursuing this goal.

Miller and Rollnick talk about bringing a fundamental approach to motivational interviewing. This fundamental approach has four components, which often overlap. These are:

- 1. Partnership (or collaboration)**
- 2. Acceptance**
- 3. Compassion**
- 4. Evocation**

So what do these components look like in practice?

Partnership or collaboration

Partnership or collaboration means working in partnership with the client, where the key worker is supportive rather than persuasive. It means working alongside a client rather than in front of or opposed to them. A confronting approach is the antithesis of the spirit of motivational interviewing. So while the key worker respects the autonomy of the client and the ownership of the issues as the clients, the language of the key worker will be inclusive, e.g. "How do we work together to come up with options..." The key worker, by working collaboratively with the client, creates a positive atmosphere conducive to change. They show a respect for a variety of ideas about how change can occur and can accept differences between their ideal plan and what clients are willing to endorse. They avoid persuasion and instead focus on supporting and exploring the client's concerns and ideas. The key worker aims to minimise power differentials and views their clients as partners. Poor adherence to a collaborative stance would see the key worker viewing the client as deficient in some manner and attempting to provide what is missing, often using an expert stance to do so.

Acceptance

Acceptance is a very Rogerian term and in the context of motivational interviewing is divided into four key points, these being:

1. **Absolute worth**
2. **Autonomy and support**
3. **Affirmation and,**
4. **Accurate empathy**

1 - Absolute worth is knowing and understanding that everyone's dignity is the same and that we are all trying to figure out who we are, where we are going and how we are going to get there. If the client feels their situation, no matter how dire, is understood and is given due respect, they will be far more likely to be open and honest regarding their issues.

2 - Autonomy and Support in motivational interviewing terms means that the responsibility for change is left with the client. This means that the key worker demonstrates respect for the client, for their resourcefulness and their ability to make choices, and indeed respects that they may choose not to change. They do not push for an immediate commitment at the expense of 'taking the long view' about the option of change in the future. The antithesis of this is for the key worker to take an authoritarian approach where they tell the client what he or she must or should do, which comes from an assumption that you know better than the client. Key workers with poor adherence to client autonomy may have difficulty accepting that clients might choose to avoid or delay change, or may decide to proceed with change in an unconventional manner. They convey a sense of urgency about the need for change.

3 - Affirmation is about finding ways to point out positive things to the individual. It is not about inundating the client with unwarranted praise nor is it about colluding with the client. What affirmation is really about is reinforcing those specific things the client says or does that may assist in understanding and/or making a change.

4 - Accurate empathy is a core skill of MI and involves much more than simply repeating back what someone says. It's about conveying to the client that you are really trying to understand what's going on with them and what this problem means to them.

Compassion

Compassion means that as the helper we are trying to work with clients in a non-judgemental, non-blaming, non-shaming way and are striving to be as empathic as possible. Essentially we are trying to understand what this problem is like for the client and what it means for them. By doing this we are attempting to help them find some form of acceptance of what is going on or to move onto a different place regarding their issue(s).

In order to feel compassion for someone we must comprehend their point of view and experience, at least to some degree. However compassion alone, without sustained empathetic understanding can be counter-therapeutic. It is not uncommon in everyday life for people to feel compassion based on the fact the other person is suffering. Despite this it is still possible to completely misperceive and misunderstand what the person is really trying to communicate, regarding what's bothering them and their experience of that bother. Key workers can do this too, believing they are being empathetic because they feel compassion for the client's situation, but misunderstand the complexity of the client's experience due to seeing the client through a 'therapist's theoretical preconceptions.'

On the other hand empathy without some kind of sympathy or compassion could be used (intentionally or not) in a manipulative or cruel fashion. Perhaps it is fair to say that empathetic understanding without compassion can be manipulative and dangerous. Compassion without empathetic understanding on the other hand can be short sighted and of limited therapeutic value. Following these four steps as a guideline will prevent this situation from occurring:

1. Recognition of emotions
2. Recognition of emotions in others
3. Being able to accurately feel what it would be like to be in that person's position
4. Based on the above, be able to adjust our own behaviour accordingly

A minimal level of empathy appears to be a universal human necessity for effective interpersonal functioning. Those who can't make sense of the mental states of others, at least to some degree, are limited in their interpersonal functioning. In addition, empathy often involves a more complex form of interpersonal understanding and involves the ability to really experience or taste and share the experience of the client, at least to some degree.

Evocation

Evocation means to draw out of the client their own perceptions, goals and values, thus key worker starts with the assumption that the resources and motivation for change reside in the client. In practice, this means that the key worker is eliciting from the client, rather than imparting information or opinions and so is doing more listening than talking.

Key workers high in evocation are curious and patient. They give the client the benefit of the doubt about wanting to change and show a focused intent to draw out the client's own desire and reasons for changing. A key worker with a poor adherence to evocation may focus on giving information, educating the client or giving logical reasons for changing, at the expense of arranging conversations so that the client talks themselves into changing.

Take the frustration out of helping people change! Would you like the ability to quickly engage with clients, elicit loads of change talk, and ultimately help clients to help themselves?

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