

Motivational Interviewing With Young People

– David S. Prescott



“I’m not going to do treatment! And you can’t make me!”

Virtually every professional who has ever worked with young people has heard some variation of this statement. Many professionals would hear these words and assume that the young person was being resistant. Astute professionals might ask, ‘Resistant to what?’. Are they resistant to changing some part of their life? Open to change but resistant to being in treatment? Or are they resistant to those of us tasked with intervening and/or providing treatment?

Historically, one response to the statement above would have been a reminder that others had sent the person to treatment and that participation was not entirely a matter of choice. Another response might have been to simply listen to the young person’s concerns and subtly persuade them of all the reasons treatment would be in their long-term best interests. In each instance, however, the result would be therapist-induced change. Motivational Interviewing (MI) involves allowing the client to make his or her own case for changing. It involves giving special attention to the language of change.

Thinking on the above client statement, one MI-informed way of understanding this would be that:

- 1) “I’m not going to do treatment” means that the client does not currently want to participate, and:
- 2) “You can’t make me” means that there is a problem in the relationship. It is likely that this young person does not yet feel heard, understood, or respected.

This means that there is not just

one area but two to explore. In MI, what we used to believe was “resistance” often reflects a desire for things to stay the same, discord in the working relationship, or both. Working on the relationship, including who you are and what your role is in this person’s life may be an essential prerequisite to sorting out his or her concerns about being in treatment.

Ultimately, MI is a person-centered approach for addressing the common problem about ambivalence towards making changes. It is built on an underlying spirit of partnership, acceptance of the person (even as we don’t accept abuse), compassion, and ongoing evocation of the client’s internal motivation to change. MI uses a guiding style (as opposed to an overly directive or following style). An MI interview typically progresses through 4 phases: Engaging the client; focusing on the change goal; evoking the client’s internal motivation to change; and, planning for making changes happen.

It all seems so simple at first. Almost everyone wants to embody the warmth and empathy of Carl

Rogers (whose work and writings originally inspired MI), and yet there are any number of traps we can fall into. Among these are the question-answer trap, in which professionals ask a long series of questions rather than using statements to reflect a deeper understanding and appreciation for the client’s autonomy and circumstances. Another trap is the expert trap, in which either the professional or the client (or both) implicitly establish the therapist as the person who is obliged to have the knowledge needed for the client to make changes. MI requires an unshakable faith that whatever the client needs to lead a better life already exists within them. We may offer help, skills and guidance, but ultimately it is the young person who possesses the strengths, attributes and motivation to build a better life.

MI is simple in concept: For many people it feels like a way of being that they have known their entire life. Putting it into practice can, however, be a challenge. MI emphasises 4 areas of skills that virtually everyone knows and yet can improve with practice: Using open-ended questions; affirmations; reflective

statements; and, offering summaries of the client's experience. Often, the proper implementation of MI involves not just mastering these skills, but abandoning older skills (such as confrontation).

Ultimately, MI can be a perfect fit for NOTA members and other professionals working with young people. It can not only resolve, but prevent, the power struggles that can occur when otherwise well-intended professionals find themselves challenged by young people. Most of all, it can help young people to access the services that are available to them.

As one step towards becoming a more MI-adherent professional, readers may wish to spend a week engaged in an ongoing thought exercise. What are all the times you observe someone listening to another person with a clear goal of understanding them? And how many times, by contrast, do you observe someone listening with a goal of simply responding?

For further information, see www.motivationalinterviewing.org.

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NOTA North West and North Wales

Presents a One Day Training Event

“Managing Life’s Hurdles – providing care
and support to people with sexualised
histories across the life course”.

Tuesday 17th December 2019, 9:15am – 4:00pm

Venue: James Parsons Building, Byrom Street, Liverpool, L3 3AF

Chair - Malcolm Muskett, NOTA General Manager

Keynote AM Speaker - Stuart Allardyce,
Director of Stop It Now! Scotland

*‘Preventing Harmful Sexual Behaviour in Adolescence:
How Do We Stop Sexual Abuse Before it Happens?’*

Keynote PM Speaker - Professor Sarah Brown

*“Can interventions designed to reduce
reoffending also reduce victimisation?”*

Cost: £40 NOTA members | **£55** Non-members
£15 Students conference

Attendance or £40 conference attendance and 1-year NOTA membership

Bookings:

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