Application of Motivational Interviewing to College & Career Decision Making

Originally developed by William R. Miller in 1983 as a useful set of techniques to use in the treatment of problem drinkers, Motivational Interviewing (MI) has evolved and has been refined as an approach to behavior change. The most recent definition of Motivational Interviewing:

> **"A collaborative, person-centered form of guiding to elicit and strengthen motivation for change" (**Miller & Rollnick, 2009).

Research findings have demonstrated the efficacy of Motivational Interviewing, and it has been rigorously tested in various settings.

Since Motivational Interviewing **focuses on exploring and resolving ambivalence** and **centers on motivational processes within the individual that facilitate change**, it is an ideal methodology to assist adolescents and young adults struggling with college and career decision making. Typically at this stage of development, students are expected to become more independent in their decision making, but may lack the skills to do so. This can result in a lack of engagement in the processes of applying to college, choosing a major, or creating a postcollegiate plan. In some cases, it is this lack of engagement that drives the student's eventual attrition from the college and career pipeline.

Many studies have shown Motivational Interviewing to be successful in motivating adolescents, including in choosing a college major or other career-related choices. Its brevity also makes it suitable for use by professionals who support college access and career development.

Below, four basic principles of MI are identified, and techniques to use when applying these principles to college and career counseling are included.

Four Selected Principles of MI

1. **Express Empathy** – Reflective listening by accepting, affirming, and trying to understand the student's struggles.

2. **Roll with Resistance** – Shifting the focus from obstacles and barriers preventing students from making tentative decisions to affirmation of students' abilities to make choices in various situations.

3. **Support Self-Efficacy** – Self-efficacy is "the attitude that one can act on one's own behalf and that it will make a difference. . ." (Goodman, 2006). This idea is at the core of MI.

4. **Develop Discrepancy** – Realization of discrepancies between goals and values and current behaviors.

Selected MI Techniques:
O.A.R.S., Confidence Talk, Change Ruler, Affirmation of Strengths

1) O.A.R.S.– 4 Strategies of Motivational Interviewing (for building rapport)

Open-Ended Questions
- ✓ Open questions gather broad descriptive information
- ✓ Facilitate dialogue
- ✓ Require more of a response than a simple yes or no
- ✓ Often start with words like "how" or "what" or "tell me about" or describe"
- ✓ Usually go from general to specific
- ✓ Convey that our agenda is about the student

Examples of Open-ended Questions:
- "How can I help you with ___?"
- "Help me understand ___?"
- "How would you like things to be different?"
- "What are the good things about ___ and what are the less positive things about it?"
- "When would you be most likely to___?"
- "What do you think you will lose if you give up ___?"
- "What have you tried before to make a change?"⬚
- "Who in your life supports you changing this behavior?"
- "What do you want to do next? How does your (behavior) affect your family?"
- "What do you know about the risks of ___?"⬚
- "Who is the most important person in your life?
     And then, "Why is __important to you?"
- "How does ____ affect your home/work life?"
- "How will ___ affect your home/work life?"

⬚

Affirm
- ✓ Must be done sincerely
- ✓ Supports and promotes self-efficacy
- ✓ Acknowledges the difficulties the student has experienced
- ✓ Validates the student's experience and feelings
- ✓ Emphasizes past experiences that demonstrate strength and success ⬚to prevent discouragement ⬚
- ✓ Affirmations are positive reinforcements, statements of a student's behavior that deserve recognition
- ✓ For affirmations to be meaningful they must be genuine and appropriate to the positive behavior

Examples of Affirming Responses:
- "I appreciate that you are willing to meet with me today."
- "You are clearly a very resourceful person."
- "You handled yourself really well in that situation."

- "That's a good suggestion."
- "Congratulations on your successful completion of your take-home exam." (Or your GED, or drug treatment, etc.)
- "Your counselor informed me that you participate well in her group . . . that is nice to hear."
- "If I were in your shoes, I don't know if I could have managed nearly so well."
- "I've enjoyed talking with you today."
- "You are very courageous to be so revealing about this."▯
- "You've accomplished a lot in a short time."▯
- "You've tried very hard to improve your grade."

Reflective Listening
- ✓ Reflective listening begins with a way of thinking
- ✓ It includes an interest in what the person has to say and a desire to truly understand how the person sees things
- ✓ It is essentially hypothesis testing
- ✓ What you think a person means may not be what they mean

There are 4 levels:
1. **Repeating** – simplest
2. **Rephrasing** – substitutes synonyms
3. **Paraphrasing** – major restatement
4. **Reflection of feeling** – deepest ▯

Reflective listening is significant in building a rapport. Reflective listening is a skill that engages others with an authentic communication exchange that builds trust, relationship and impacts the desire to change. It requires really listening to what the student is saying, responding back to the student to ensure understanding of what the student just said and/or to clarify.

Using some standard phrases may help until the skill feels comfortable:
- "So you feel . . .▯"
- "It sounds like you . . .▯"
- "You're wondering if . . .▯"
- "So what I hear you saying is . . .▯"
- "This is what I am hearing, please correct me if I am wrong . . ."

Summarize
- ✓ Summaries reinforce what has been said, show that you have been listening carefully, and prepare the student to move on
- ✓ Summaries can link together the student's feelings of ambivalence and promote perception of discrepancy

Example of Summaries: Begin with a statement indicating you are making a summary:
- "Let me see if I understand so far . . .▯"
- "Here is what I've heard. . ."
- "Tell me if I've missed anything . . ."
- "What you've said is important."▯

- "I value what you say."
- "Here are the salient points . . ."
- "Did I hear you correctly?"
- "We covered that well. Now let's talk about . . ."
- "In summarizing . . .

2) Examples of Questions to Elicit CONFIDENCE TALK:

- "How might you go about making this change?"
- "What might be a good first step?"
- "Given what you know about yourself, how could you make this change successfully?"
- "What obstacles do you foresee, and how might you deal with them?"
- "What gives you some confidence that you can do this?"

3) Example questions using "CONFIDENCE RULER" approach

- "How confident are you that you could do this if you decided to?
- "On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all confident and 10 is extremely confident, where would you say you are?"
- "Why are you at a ___ and not at 0?" (Or a lower number)
- "What would it take for you to go from __ to a [higher number]?"
- "How might I help you to go from a ___ to a [higher number]?"

Summarize the answers, selecting the focus:
- *If importance is low (<5), focus on importance first*
- *If both are about the same, focus on importance first*
- *If one number is distinctly lower than the other, focus on the lower number first*
- *If both are very low (<3), explore feelings about participating in discussion of the issue ("all of this")*

Some students have difficulty with the use of numbers to signify an ordinal scale. A helpful adaptation is to draw a visual scale:

0   1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10
Least Confident   Most Confident

Ask the student to point on the scale to indicate how important or confident he or she feels about making a behavior change.

IMPORTANT: Remember not to reverse the question by asking: "Why are you at a ___ and not 10?"

4) Identifying and AFFIRMING STRENGTHS

In order for students to identify their own interests in terms of college and career, they must be able to identify strengths in themselves. For students who struggle to see themselves in a positive way, there is

significant change that will need to take place in the student's automatic thinking about themselves. **"Successful changers" are those students who are able to move from their current low level of engagement in goal setting and goal attainment, to a more functional level.** Some of the traits below are indicative of the capacity to make this type of change. Helping students to see that they possess several of these traits helps the student to change self-concept.

Some Characteristics of SUCCESSFUL CHANGERS

Accepting	Committed	Flexible	Persevering	Stubborn
Active	Competent	Focused	Persistent	Thankful
Adaptable	Concerned	Forgiving	Positive	Thorough
Adventuresome	Confident	Forward-looking	Powerful	Thoughtful
Affectionate	Considerate	Free	Prayerful	Tough
Affirmative	Courageous	Happy	Quick	Trusting
Alert	Creative	Healthy	Reasonable	Trustworthy
Alive	Decisive	Hopeful	Receptive	Truthful
Ambitious	Dedicated	Imaginative	Relaxed	Understanding
Anchored	Determined	Ingenious	Reliable	Unique
Assertive	Die-hard	Intelligent	Resourceful	Unstoppable
Assured	Diligent	Knowledgeable	Responsible	Vigorous
Attentive	Doer	Loving	Sensible	Visionary
Bold	Eager	Mature	Skillful	Whole
Brave	Earnest	Open	Solid	Wiling
Bright	Effective	Optimistic	Spiritual	Winning
Capable	Energetic	Orderly	Stable	Wise
Careful	Experienced	Organized	Steady	Worthy
Cheerful	Faithful	Patient	Straight	Zealous
Clever	Fearless	Perceptive	Strong	Zestful

Author's note: *I would remove the term "straight" from this list when using with students, lest it be misinterpreted as a slight against LGBT individuals. Obviously, that is not the definition Miller and Rollnick were going for, but why take chances that someone might feel attacked or offended?*

Sources:

Goodman, J. (2006). Toward a holistic view. In D. Capuzzi & M. D. Stauffer (Eds.), Career *counseling: Foundations, perspectives, and applications* (pp. 69-93). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

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