Motivational Interviewing Skill Focus: Reflective Listening

Motivational Interviewing (MI), defined: “A client-centered practitioner directed method for enhancing intrinsic motivation to change by exploring and resolving ambivalence,” as defined by William R. Miller and Steven Rollnick (2002, p. 25), the founders of Motivational Interviewing.

MI “is a way of being with a client, not just a set of techniques for doing counseling” (Miller & Rollnick, 1991).

MI places a great deal of emphasis on the relationship that is established between the counselor and the client. While MI is defined as being directive on the part of the practitioner, there is always the awareness that the therapeutic relationship one of “alliance” and collaborative partnership, (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, TIP 35, p. 39). MI is also based upon the following research supported assumption: the more a client talks of changing his or her behavior, the more likely he or she will do so. Miller and Rollnick have defined this action change talk.

Through the use of a fundamental counseling skill, Reflective Listening, the counselor can demonstrate the following (Tomlin et.al., p. 27):

- A desire to hear exactly what the client intends.
- Empathic response: Marshall Rosenberg defines empathy as an “emptying [of] the mind and listening with the whole being [which in turn] … allow[s] the [clients] to touch deeper parts of themselves” (Rosenberg, p. 91, 102).
- Reflection of the client’s emotions which in turn allows a reflection of the client’s internal process, and can promote motivation.
- Guidance toward change talk.
- A respectful setting aside of reflective statements which the client disagrees with or indicates he or she is not ready to deal with.

Types of Reflections: Basic Tools for Developing MI Skills

- **Simple**: Repeat back what the client says, using the same words or rephrasing using similar words.
- **Complex**: Paraphrasing, summarizing, affirming, using metaphors. Capturing unstated meaning and emotions from the client. (Tomlin et. al., p. 29)

Reflective Listening allows for alignment of the MI approach with certain traditional native values and worldviews. Examples include:

- **Relationship Oriented Thinking**: the counselor “joins” the client through the act of listening so that they may both move toward and along the path of change.
Examples Continue:

- **Cooperation**: The counselor demonstrates and intent to work with the client when he or she mirrors the client’s point of view through reflection.

- **Indirectness**: Through the use of complex reflection and summary, the counselor can guide a client toward desired change talk and ultimately toward client identified goals in a non-confrontational and respectful way.

- **Change is upsetting**: Reflective listening can quickly alert the counselor of client ambivalence and allows the counselor the ability to “roll with it”; in this, a message is sent to the client that the counselor understands the fact that change can be a frightening and difficult process. (Tomlin et.al., p. 5).

**Words Are Windows (Or They’re Walls)**

I feel so sentenced by your words  
I feel so judged and sent away  
Before I go, I’ve got to know  
Is that what you mean to say?  
Before I rise to my defense,  
Before I speak in hurt or fear,  
Before I build that wall of words,  
Tell me, did I really hear?  

Words are windows, or they’re walls,  
They sentence us, or set us free.  
When I speak and when I hear,  
Let the love shine through me.  
There are things I need to say,  
Things that mean so much to me,  
If my words don’t make me clear,  
Will you help me to be free?  
If I seem to put you down,  
If you felt I didn’t care,  
Try to listen through my words  
To the feelings that we share.

- Ruth Bebermeyer  
(Cited in Non-Violent Communication: A Way of Life, p. xxviii)

**References**


