

Building Trust, Motivating Change

Syllabus

Introduction

Expert – Liz Barnett, MSW, PhD, an expert on the technique of “motivational interviewing,” who helps parents understand how to increase a youth’s motivation and engagement for behavior change.

In this course, Dr. Barnett helps resource parents develop a set of skills to engage a youth in “change talk,” that is, a youth expressing any desire, ability, reason, or need to change, which is needed in order to bring about change. The skills Dr. Barnett teaches can help parents build mutual trust with their child, which is also needed for change to happen.

The goal of motivational interviewing—or “MI”—is to create an open, nonjudgmental environment where it’s possible to strengthen a person’s motivation and commitment to change. Some experts feel motivational interviewing works best with young people who are at least at the cognitive age of a 13-year-old. In this course, we will be focusing on teenagers.

Open-Ended Questions Exercise

One key MI skill parents need is how to ask open-ended questions, which are questions that require more than a one-word answer, allowing the conversation to grow and include the teen’s opinion. In a short exercise, viewers are presented with a series of typical questions parents ask teens and choose whether each is an open-ended question or a closed one. After they make each choice, Dr. Barnett provides feedback.

The basic mission of an open-ended question is to understand the youth’s perspective, and then the parent’s job is to listen!

The Need for Collaboration

Rather than telling a teen what to do, parents need to work with the teen to define a problem and then invite the teen to decide how they want to tackle it. That collaborative approach has the best hope of leading to the desired change.

A self-reflective exercise helps viewers understand their current approach to collaborating with the youth in their care

Building Trust

As an example of how MI can help build mutual trust between parents and youth, James Pritchard, a foster father, describes what happened when Matt joined his family as a teenager and how he and his wife were slowly able to develop a trusting relationship with Matt.

1st Component: Spirit

MI is based on three main components: the *spirit*, which is the parent’s beliefs about the youth; the *skills* needed to encourage talking about change; and a *process*, or structure, to get to that change. Each of these three components is made up of several elements.

In MI, spirit is a way of being with others that's based on the elements of *partnership*, *compassion*, *empowerment*, and *acceptance*. Partnership begins with building trust, and it means the parent works with the teen as a team. Compassion is the parent giving the youth's needs priority over their own. Empowerment is the parent helping their youth make their own decisions rather than making the decisions for them. Acceptance is about communicating empathy and understanding and being nonjudgmental; it does not mean the same thing as approval.

Spirit Exercise

James Pritchard returns to continue his story about the struggle he and his wife Angela are having with their son Matt hiding perishable food in his room. An exercise using the issue of Matt hiding food then allows viewers to practice their understanding of the spirit of MI.

The exercise helps clarify that, in MI, spirit is needed to build mutual trust. Acceptance, compassion, partnership, and empowerment all help parents build a relationship and strengthen the trust with the youth in their care.

2nd Component: Skills

The skills of motivational interviewing are needed to work toward change. These skills make up the acronym OARS, which stands for *Open-Ended Questions*, *Affirmations*, *Reflections*, and *Summaries*.

As discussed earlier, open-ended questions open up a conversation. They send the message that the parent wants to hear what the youth thinks and has to say about a topic. The skill of being affirming is the ability of parents to recognize and commend a youth for their positive efforts, verbalized thoughts, or behaviors, no matter how big or small.

Reflections vs. Affirmations Exercise

Reflections are the "R" in OARS, and they are key to the establishment of good communication between the parent and the teen. Reflecting is a process of mirroring back what the parent is hearing. It shows that they are listening (and not judging), and it can help the youth hear themselves and become more self-reflective.

Affirmations can be used anytime to give positive feedback to a teen, whereas reflections happen during a conversation and recognize what the teen has said, without judgment. An exercise helps viewers practice recognizing the difference between affirmations and reflections.

Reflective Listening

The simplest type of reflective listening is when a parent just repeats what the teen said. A better approach involves *paraphrasing*, that is, restating what was said but using different words. When young people have a difficult time finding the words to express themselves, parents might need to expand on what was said by *paraphrasing* and *adding new ideas* to the thought. Most important when doing reflections is for parents to maintain the spirit that they are truly seeking to understand the youth.

Dr. Barnett encourages parents to use reflective listening as much as possible and to try to use more reflections than questions when doing motivational interviewing.

Summaries

In general, summarizing is reviewing the discussion, either midway through or at the end of a conversation. There isn't a need to repeat everything that was said, just bring together the key points that are needed to move towards change.

3rd Component: Process

There are four steps in the MI process: *engaging*, which requires that resource parents spend time making sure they understand the topic or situation from the youth's perspective; *focusing*, or identifying a specific behavior a parent would like to motivate their youth to change; *evoking*, in which parents ask the youth to express the reasons or good things about making the targeted change; and finally, *planning* the change.

The most common mistake people make is to skip over the engaging and evoking steps in their rush to make a plan.

Change Talk

The last topic the course covers is change talk, which Dr. Barnett explained in general at the beginning of the course but discusses here in greater depth. She explains that a youth's statement is change talk as long as it expresses a desire, reason, or need to change or for a certain outcome. It can even include talking about one's ability to do something or steps they have taken.

Parents must be able to *recognize* when change talk is happening, and once they do, they should respond to it positively, in order to strengthen or reinforce it. If a youth expresses no interest in changing (what is called "status quo talk"), the parent should acknowledge it and try to understand the youth's perspective. If parents hear no change talk but feel there is a need for a change, they will need to elicit change talk from the teen using open-ended questions.

Eliciting Change Talk Exercise

In this exercise, viewers hear three resource parents who want to motivate a teen to make a change. Each one explains a situation with the teen, and then viewers are asked to select the best of four options to move the conversation forward. Dr. Barnett provides feedback after each selection is made.

Responding to Discord

Here Dr. Barnett discusses what parents can do if they get resistance from a youth. She begins by saying it is helpful to think about resistance differently. Instead of thinking of it as the youth having a problem ("they are being resistant"), the MI approach encourages parents to think of it as having discord or a problem in the relationship. This empowers parents, as it means there is something they can do about it. They will need to use their best reflective listening skills to help them understand the situation from the youth's perspective. If they have upset the youth, they are encouraged to apologize and be affirming. They can also ask to change the topic and come back to it later.

MI in Practice

A scenario is presented of a 16-year-old girl who is infatuated with an older boy at her school. She's excited that he wants to go to a movie with her, and because there is mutual trust between the girl and

her adoptive parents, they are inclined to let her go. However, they want to meet him first, plus they have some concerns that the boy might pressure their daughter to have sex. This scenario provides Dr. Barnett an opportunity to offer some guidance on how to approach such a situation using motivational interviewing.

Conclusion

In concluding the course, Dr. Barnett says the best way to learn MI is to pay close attention to the reactions of the youth. Their responses are feedback about the parents' skills. If the youth is getting defensive, parents should stop what they're doing and start listening again. Further, we can all improve our communication skills by being deliberate with our words and becoming exceptional listeners, especially at home. MI provides a framework for helping parents help youth tap into their own desires for a better life and can be remarkably powerful when done well.