

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION Overview

Definition of MI

Notice the vital components of MI in the definition below: relational components are underlined and *technical components* are italicized:

Motivational Interviewing is a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with *particular attention to the language of change*. It is designed to *strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion* (emphasis added; Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 29).

Both are essential to effective MI practice.

MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING OVERVIEW



SPIRIT OF MI: PACE

- **Partnership:** Youth are experts on themselves. MI conversations are like dancing, not wrestling.
- **Acceptance:** MI offers nonjudgmental and empathic acceptance for the person as they are. People are more open to change when they feel accepted.
- **Compassion:** MI puts empathy into motion and prioritizes the interests and well-being of the youth.
- **Empowerment:** MI actively promotes autonomy for young people to make decisions and solve their own problems within the structure and resources of the program.

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION

Overview



FOUR TASKS: THE ROADMAP OF CHANGE

A team member's first task is to **engage** and build a working alliance with the youth. Once rapport is established, the practitioner and adolescent collaborate on one or more goals to **focus** the change conversation. Next the practitioner **evokes** the youth's motivation toward the specific behavior change. Shifting into **planning** may occur when the balance of a youth's statements tilts away from sustain talk and toward change talk in a more consistent manner. Think of the tasks as a staircase where you can move up or down according to the needs of the young person.



CHANGE TALK (DARNCATs)

Change talk consists of statements in favor of change. Self-perception theory states that when a person talks in favor of change, their perspective begins to line up with their statements. The practitioner's primary role is to recognize, evoke, and respond to change talk within an atmosphere of partnership, acceptance, compassion, and empowerment.

RECOGNIZING CHANGE TALK

Type	Sounds like...
Desire	I want, I wish, I hope
Ability	I can, I could
Reason	Factors supporting change: If I do change, If I don't change
Need	Reason plus urgency: I need to, I have to
Commitment	I will, I have
Activation	I'm considering, I'm thinking about
Taking steps	I [insert action toward change]



CORE SKILLS: ROARS

The acronym ROARS leads with reflections, the hallmark of MI practice. It refers to the core skills of MI: Reflections, Open questions, Affirmations, and Reflective Summaries.

Practitioners are encouraged to aim for half of their reflections to be complex and for a beginning reflection-to-question ratio of 1:1, with the goal to increase the number of reflections as their MI skills improve.

The following six practitioner cue cards highlight key Motivational Interviewing core skills and strategies. They can be used as a complete set or individually to support and enhance practice.

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION ROARS in Action

MI CUE CARD:



ROARS in Action

The acronym ROARS leads with reflections, the hallmark of MI practice. ROARS refers to the core skills of MI: Reflections, Open questions, Affirmations, and Reflective Summaries. Use the prompts below to form high-quality ROARS.

Reflections are statements about what the practitioner thinks the youth means. Reflections convey accurate empathy, allow the team member to highlight change talk, and invite the youth to elaborate and clarify as they continue thinking and talking. Practitioners are encouraged to aim for half of their reflections to be complex and for a beginning reflection-to-question ratio of at least 1:1, with the goal of increasing reflections over time.

Types and levels of reflections:

- **Simple:** Restates or rephrases using the same or similar words.
- **Complex:** Goes beyond what the youth said, adding meaning to move the conversation forward.
- **Feeling:** Names the emotion you think the youth might be feeling.
- **Double-sided:** Reflects ambivalence; start with sustain talk, end with change talk.
- **Metaphor:** Offers a visual model for understanding.

Forming reflections:

- "You're feeling..."
- "You're thinking..."
- "You're wondering..."
- "On one hand [insert sustain talk], and on the other hand [insert change talk]."
- "You're looking toward the finish line."

Powerful reflections are accurate, clear, and succinct; they invite elaboration from the youth.

Open questions elicit the youth's perspective and evoke change talk. Consider how they function within each of the four tasks as your intention for asking a question. Start with "what," "how," "describe," and "tell me about," for example.

Forming open questions in the four tasks:

ENGAGING

- "Tell me more about..."
- "Describe..."
- "What is _____ like for you?"

FOCUSING

- "What topic would you like to focus on?"
- "What would be most helpful today?"
- "What's on your agenda for today?"

EVOKING

- Change rulers (importance/confidence)
- "What might be the benefits if you decided to...?"
- "What else?"

PLANNING

- "What ideas have you considered to...?"
- "What would you like to know more about...?"
- "How might you go about?"

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION ROARS in Action

Affirmations are statements of a youth's actions, efforts, strengths, abilities, values, and skills. Just as there are simple and complex levels of reflections, the fourth edition (2023) of Miller and Rollnick's work on MI recognizes simple and complex levels of affirmations.

- **Simple affirmations** are reflections of something the person has said or done that is commendable or noteworthy. As with simple reflections, offering too many can seem insincere and superficial.
- **Complex affirmations** are reflections of qualities or characteristics inherent within the person. They go deeper than actions to recognize enduring strengths or values the person possesses.

Forming affirmations:

- Use "You..." rather than "I..." to keep the focus on the youth.
- Identify ONE specific action, effort, strength, ability, value, or skill per affirmation.
- Ensure that the affirmation is accurate, genuine, and meaningful to the adolescent.
- "You've been working hard to [get your grades up]." (Simple affirmation)
- "You're discovering new interests." (Simple affirmation)
- "[Helping your family] is important to you." (Complex affirmation)
- "You are [brave] for [making new friends]." (Complex affirmation)

Please see the Affirmations Cue Card for more.

Reflective Summaries are statements organized around themes from the conversation. Capitalizing on the momentum of the change conversation, reflective summaries set the stage for a **key question**, the effect of which is to assess the balance of sustain talk and change talk. JDTC team members are encouraged to close each conversation with a **reflective summary plus a key question**.

Forming reflective summaries:

- Highlight change talk and affirmations.
- Connect the behavior change to the youth's goals and values.
- If the youth is ambivalent, meaning they haven't decided whether to change, start with brief sustain talk leading into change talk and affirmations.

Follow a summary with one key question:

- "What do you think you might do?"
- "Where does this leave you now?"
- "What might be the next step?"
- "What might help you decide?"
- "How would you like to proceed?"

The key question asks the person to consider what might be next without asking directly about readiness (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Notice the difference between "What are you **going** to do?" and "What do you think you **might** do?" The first implies pressure, even if it is unintended, and the second invites imagining what change might look like without the expectation to carry it out.

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION

Affirmations

MI CUE CARD:



Affirmations

Affirmations are reflections of a youth's actions, efforts, strengths, abilities, values, or skills. Think of affirmations as wind powering the sailboat of change. They bolster a youth's developing sense of self-efficacy, which is a person's belief that they would be successful if they decide to make a change.

In a study looking at which specific individual therapist behaviors elicited client change talk and sustain talk in MI, **affirmations were the only therapist microskill that both increased change talk and reduced sustain talk** (Apodaca et al., 2016). This finding has significant implications for treatment when coupled with the fact that increased change talk and decreased sustain talk are correlated with successful behavior change.

Simple affirmations are reflections of something the person has said or done that is commendable or noteworthy. As with simple reflections, offering too many can seem insincere and superficial. They are generally easy to observe and offer (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Complex affirmations are reflections of qualities or characteristics inherent within the person. They go deeper than actions to recognize enduring strengths or values the person possesses.

Examples:

Simple affirmations	Complex affirmations
• "You've been going to treatment groups." • "You've got a few months substance-free so far, and you're discovering new interests." • "You know what works for you."	• "You value being independent; getting into that computer program would help." • "Helping your family is important to you." • "You are brave for making new friends."

To form an affirmation

- Use "You..." rather than "I..." to keep the focus on the youth.
- Identify ONE specific action, effort, strength, ability, value, or skill per affirmation.
- Ensure that the affirmation is accurate, genuine, and meaningful to the adolescent.

Remember to strategically reflect any change talk following the affirmation.

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION Affirmations

Affirmation starters

Tailor the sentences below to youth in the JDTC program. Replace the bracketed portions of the examples with something commendable the youth said or did, or an enduring quality or characteristic they demonstrate. For complex affirmations, use the table titled Some Characteristics of Successful Changers for Youth for inspiration.

- “You’ve been working hard to [get your grades up].” (Simple affirmation)
- “You’ve been [meeting with your counselor].” (Simple affirmation)
- “[Helping your family] is important to you.” (Complex affirmation)
- “You are [brave] for [making new friends].” (Complex affirmation)

Some Characteristics of Successful Changers for Youth (Wyatt & Knottnerus, 2025)

Think about a young person you are working with. Instead of general statements or praise, such as “Great job!” or “You’re a rock star!”, use the list below for inspiration to affirm a youth’s specific action, effort, strength, ability, value, or skill.

Accepting	Decisive	Happy	Reliable
Active	Dedicated	Helpful	Resourceful
Adaptable	Detail oriented	Hopeful	Responsible
Adventurous	Determined	Imaginative	Seeks support
Ambitious	Empowered	Independent	Skeptical
Assertive	Encouraging	Intelligent	Stable
Authentic	Family	Kind	Strong
Brave	Flexible	Knowledgeable	Supports others
Calm	Focused	Leader	Thankful
Caring	Forgiving	Observant	Thoughtful
Clever	Forward-looking	Open minded	Tough
Compassionate	Friendly	Optimistic	Trustworthy
Compromises	Funny	Organized	Understanding
Confident	Generous	Patient	Unique
Contributes	Gets things done	Perceptive	Unstoppable
Courageous	Good friend	Persistent	Values community
Creative	Good listener	Real	Willing

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION Strategies for Cultivating Change Talk

MI CUE CARD:



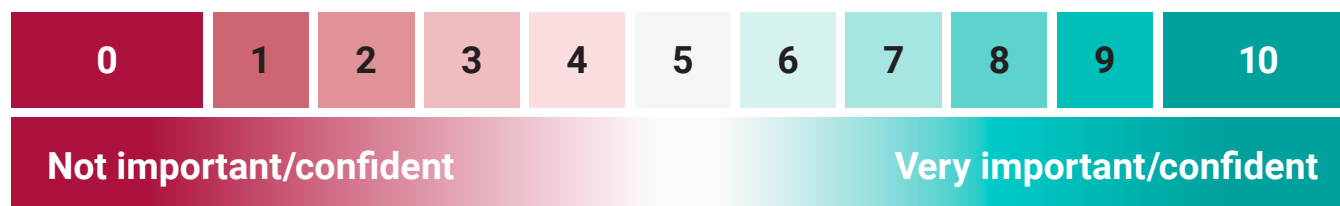
Strategies for Cultivating Change Talk

MI practitioners recognize, invite, and strengthen change talk. There are a number of strategic open questions designed to evoke change talk. **Preparatory change talk** indicates that the person is *thinking about change* and includes the youth's desire, ability, reason, and need (DARN) for change. **Mobilizing change talk** signals the person is "getting closer to actually changing" (Miller & Rollnick, 2023, p. 86), and consists of commitment, activation, and taking steps (CATs). Practitioners are encouraged to pay attention to all types of change talk, as "most research shows that all kinds of change talk favor subsequent change" (Miller & Rollnick, 2023, p. 89).

This cue card lists examples of specific strategies to cultivate change talk. MI practitioners respond to the change talk with reflections and affirmations. Work toward evoking the young person's internal motivation for change by connecting their goals and values to behavior change.

Change rulers

- "On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all important and 10 means extremely important, how **important** is it for you to change your use of marijuana?"
- The youth answers with a number, and the follow-up question is:
 - "What makes you a 6 and not a 2?"
 - The follow-up question elicits change talk.
- Use the same strategy to rate confidence to change: "On a scale from 0 to 10, how **confident** are you that you can change your use of marijuana?"



Exploring extremes

- "What might be the **best** things that could happen if you found something structured to do after school?"
 - "What might be the **worst** things that could happen if you continued to have nothing to do after school?"
- "What might be the **best** things that could happen if you stopped drinking?"
 - "What might be the **worst** things that could happen if you continued drinking?"

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION

Strategies for Cultivating Change Talk

Asking evocative questions about DARNCATs

- “What do you hope to get out of the drug court program?” (DESIRE)
- “Tell me about the last time you tried to quit smoking marijuana.” (ABILITY)
- “What might make it worth your while to complete high school?” (REASON)
- “What feels urgent about stopping drinking?” (NEED)
- “What might you be able to commit to?” (COMMITMENT)
- “What are some things you’ve considered changing about your marijuana use?” (ACTIVATION)
- “What are some steps you’ve already taken?” (TAKING STEPS)

Looking back

- “Looking back, how were things different before you started smoking marijuana?”
- “When you were younger, what kinds of things did your family do together?”
- “What was school like for you when you were younger?”
- “Tell me about your childhood best friend.”

Looking forward

- “If you look ahead, how might things be different if you completed high school?”
- “Thinking ahead to the summer, how do you see yourself spending your time?”
- “Imagine that you’ve stopped smoking marijuana three months from now. How would your life be different?”

Exploring goals and values

- “How might completing the drug court program support your goals?”
- “How might changing your substance use give you more freedom?”
- “How might your relationship with your grandmother be different if you changed your marijuana use?”
- “What have people told you you’re good at?”

“What else?”

Before moving on to another strategy, continue asking “What else?” to expand and deepen change talk and strengthen intrinsic motivation from the youth. Then reflect and affirm. Further exploration in this manner evokes richness and depth of thought regarding behavior change.

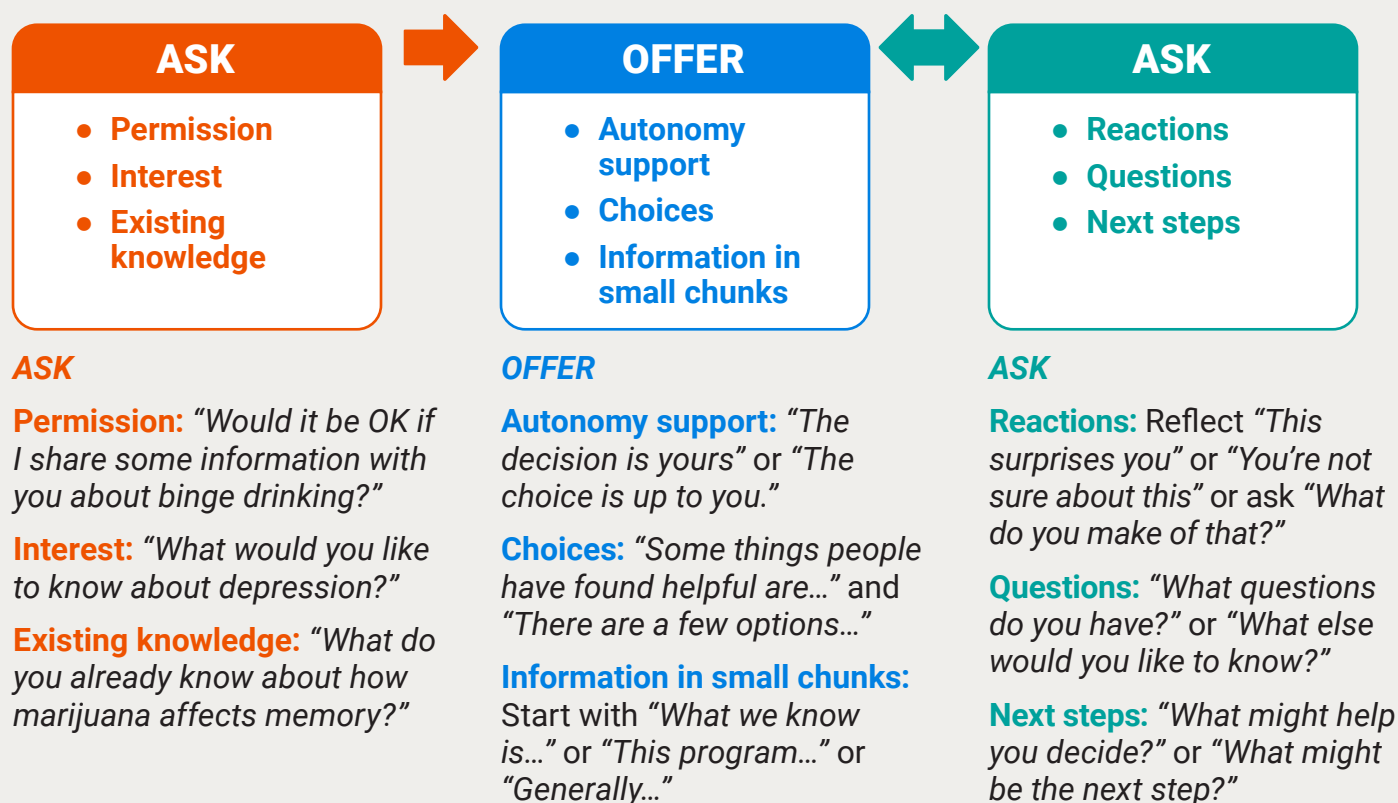
Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION

Ask – Offer – Ask

MI CUE CARD:

Ask – Offer – Ask

Ask – Offer – Ask (AOA) is an MI-consistent method for sharing information. This model guides practitioners to start with the youth's existing knowledge, prioritize the youth's interest, offer choices and information in small pieces, and elicit thoughts and reactions. Allow time for the youth to consider how the information might apply to their situation.



TIPS

- Young people are more likely to consider new information when they are empowered to make their own choices.
- This model is flexible, with the practitioner able to bounce back and forth between the parts.
- How the practitioner offers choices is important. “If you suggest just one option at a time, the almost automatic reaction is to say why it won’t work—in other words, to voice sustain talk” (Miller & Rollnick, 2023, p. 194). Instead, offer a **menu of options** and ask the youth what they think about them.

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION Rethinking Resistance and Dodging Discord

MI CUE CARD:

Rethinking Resistance and Dodging Discord

In the third edition of *MI: Helping People Change* (2013), Miller and Rollnick discontinued use of the term “resistance” to describe “any apparent client movement away from change” (p. 196). Labeling a person as resistant:

- Places responsibility for not changing solely on the adolescent.
- Blames the youth for “being difficult.”
- Pathologizes the person for behaviors consistent with ambivalence, which is a natural part of the change process.

Instead, they now view resistance as a phenomenon occurring between two people that increases or decreases based on the practitioner’s communication style. “Any ... movement away from change” can be broken down into two parts: **sustain talk** and **discord** (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

Sustain Talk	Discord
Reasons to stay the same, or not change	A disturbance in the relationship between the youth and team member
A natural part of ambivalence	A common response to the fixing reflex
A common response to feeling pushed into changing prematurely	Signals the practitioner to shift their approach

Discord may occur in response to the practitioner telling the youth how to change rather than evoking ideas, or as an indicator that the person is feeling overwhelmed, disengaged, hopeless, or misunderstood. **To dodge discord:**

1. Listen for what is important to the person. Reflect and affirm to convey accurate empathy.
2. Engage, focus, evoke.
3. Work toward building intrinsic motivation by connecting behavior change to the youth’s goals and values.

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams, SECOND EDITION

Strategies for Softening Sustain Talk

MI CUE CARD:



Strategies for Softening Sustain Talk

Sustain talk is a type of youth language in favor of staying the same rather than changing. It is the opposite of change talk: youth can express a desire, ability, reason, need, or commitment *not* to change. This cue card provides guidelines and strategies for softening sustain talk.

Guidelines for Softening Sustain Talk

- Decide whether or not to reflect sustain talk.
 - If you decide to reflect sustain talk, do so simply and briefly.
- Listen for opportunities to reflect change talk that might be intertwined with sustain talk.
- Words and phrases added to reflections such as “*right now*,” “*yet*,” or “*sometimes*” convey accurate empathy while at the same time adding a temporary time qualifier to leave open the possibility for change.

Strategies to Soften Sustain Talk

Observe each strategy in action in response to the following sample youth statement:

“Everyone is nagging me about smoking weed. Yes, I smoke when I need to focus and calm down. I would be in way more trouble if I didn’t smoke.”

Simple reflection	<i>“Smoking weed has helped you in some ways.”</i>
Double-sided reflection	<i>“You feel weed has been helpful in some ways, and it’s causing problems in others.”</i>
Amplified reflection	<i>“Smoking weed is the ONLY way you can stay calm.”</i>
Emphasizing autonomy	<i>“There’s a lot for you to think about; ultimately, the choice is yours.”</i>
Reframing	<i>“A lot of people care about you.”</i>
Shifting attention	<i>“You’re not sure about changing this right now; there’s something else you’d rather start with first.”</i>
Apologizing	<i>“You’re feeling pressured, and I apologize if I accidentally added to it. I want to understand your perspective.”</i>
Coming alongside	<i>“You feel things might be worse if you didn’t smoke.”</i>
Pendulum approach	In this strategy, the practitioner reflects a bit of sustain talk while looking for opportunities to swing into change talk. It can be helpful when strategies to cultivate change talk aren’t gaining traction yet. As with amplified reflections, this approach should be used sparingly and with care. See Dialogue 3 in the TAB for an illustration of this strategy.



Acknowledgments:

MI Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams: Practitioner Cue Cards 2nd ed. co-authors Jennifer Wyatt and Margaret Soukup are members of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT).

This guidebook is published by All Rise in collaboration with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ).

For more information about the All Rise Treatment Court Institute or this document, please contact:

All Rise Treatment Court Institute
1800 Diagonal Road, Suite 600
Alexandria, VA 22314

www.allrise.org

©2026, All Rise. All rights reserved.



[instagram.com/allrise_org/](https://www.instagram.com/allrise_org/)



[facebook.com/allrise.org/](https://www.facebook.com/allrise.org/)



[linkedin.com/company/weallrise/](https://www.linkedin.com/company/weallrise/)



x.com/_allrise_



[youtube.com/@AllRise_org](https://www.youtube.com/@AllRise_org)



allrise.org