

Motivational Interviewing Skills in Action for Juvenile Drug Treatment Court Teams

A TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE BULLETIN

Second Edition



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Acknowledgments

All Rise is the leading training, membership, and advocacy organization for advancing justice system responses to individuals with substance use and mental health disorders. All Rise impacts every stage of the justice system, from first contact with law enforcement to corrections and reentry, and works with public health leaders to improve treatment outcomes for justice-involved individuals. Through its four divisions—the Treatment Court Institute, Impaired Driving Solutions, Justice for Vets, and the Center for Advancing Justice—All Rise provides training and technical assistance at the local and national level, advocates for federal and state funding, and collaborates with public and private entities. All Rise works in every U.S. state and territory and in countries throughout the world.

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Introduction

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is an evidence-based practice with deep roots in substance use treatment (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Naar & Suarez, 2021). Since its initial start as an intervention for adults with alcohol use disorder in the early 1980s, more than 2,000 studies have documented its effectiveness in guiding people toward change (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). During this time, MI has been applied in a growing number of settings, including therapeutic courts, social work, schools, mental health treatment, and probation and parole. Research with youth and young adults has expanded as well, showing beneficial impacts of MI (Naar & Suarez, 2021) with evidence that MI is as effective for older adolescents as it is for adults (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Overall, while most studies show some degree of benefit, about one-quarter did not, meaning that “MI does not *a/ways* help people change” (Miller & Rollnick, 2023, p. 299). Successful behavior change depends on many dynamic factors such as timing, the client’s level of ambivalence, motivation, availability of resources, and the fidelity with which the practitioner delivers MI, to name a few. The approach of MI seems to be “particularly helpful for people with initially lower motivation for change and higher initial anger or resistance,” making it suitable for people in need of building motivation for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2023, p. 301).

Juvenile drug treatment courts (JDTCs) are designed to support young people affected by substance use disorders. The way practitioners working with these courts connect with youth can make all the difference. Therefore, best practices call for training and use of evidence-based approaches like Motivational Interviewing. This technical assistance bulletin (TAB) is intended to (a) describe the spirit, skills, and strategies of MI with adolescents in JDTC programs; (b) encourage the interest of team members in understanding and applying MI; and (c) offer examples of MI in action specific to working with youth in JDTCs.

People of all educational levels, lived experiences, and backgrounds can learn and use the spirit, skills, and strategies associated with the MI style of communication (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Most practitioners successfully develop skills with guided practice; that is, after learning the basic concepts, the person receives coaching and feedback as their practice is observed (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Rosengren, 2018). Learning MI is similar to playing a musical instrument or a sport. Musicians and athletes improve with observed practice and feedback to shape their skill development. Beginning with an understanding of the theory and practice, JDTC team members may develop proficiency in the spirit, skills, and strategies through training, feedback on observed practice, and coaching.



Since the publication of the first edition of this TAB in 2021, three relevant works have been released that inspired the need for a second edition. William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick updated the third edition of their foundational book, *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (2013), with a fourth edition, *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change and Grow* (2023), in which they replaced “evocation” with “empowerment” in the spirit of MI, expanded levels of affirmations, and further refined concepts. Sylvie Naar and Mariann Suarez updated their 2010 book *Motivational Interviewing With Adolescents and Young Adults* to a second edition (2021), where they draw from a decade of experience conducting implementation research and training practitioners in effectively engaging young people in change conversations. Lastly, Douglas C. Smith published *Motivational Interviewing With Families*, in which he reimagined the acronym for the core skills as leading with reflective listening, which is a hallmark of MI practice (2025). Concepts from these works have informed updated content throughout the second edition of this TAB.

Specific communication skills to guide youth toward change are illustrated through concrete examples, and an effective method for sharing information, known as Ask – Offer – Ask, is described. Core skills, reenvisioned by Smith (2025) as ROARS,¹ and strategic methods for cultivating change talk and softening sustain talk are presented. Sample dialogue using common scenarios encountered in JDTC settings demonstrate how the spirit, skills, and strategies work together to motivate adolescents toward change. Lastly, strategies for navigating challenging situations, such as when youth say “*I don’t know*” during conversations, and ideas for approaching a youth’s slip or setback, are offered.

This TAB functions as a reference for applying MI skills and strategies within the context of JDTC work. Throughout the TAB, action tips suggest specific ways in which the JDTC team members may implement components of MI quickly. Similarly, the companion MI overview and cue cards offer portable visual prompts and reminders for use in court, in precourt staff meetings, and in meetings with youth and their families. The practitioner cards cover MI Overview, Definition, Spirit, Four Tasks, Change Talk, and Core Skills. The six MI cue cards cover ROARS in Action, Affirmations, Strategies for Cultivating Change Talk, Ask – Offer – Ask, Rethinking Resistance and Dodging Discord, and Strategies for Softening Sustain Talk.

There is potential for change in any interaction. While the case manager, treatment provider, and juvenile probation counselor (JPC) might have more direct contact with youth, there is value in all JDTC team members learning and applying the concepts of MI. When team members operate from a shared understanding of MI, the spirit lives in all interactions.

¹ Readers familiar with MI may recall the core skills acronym as OARS. ROARS is the acronym for the core skills of MI used in the second edition of the TAB: Reflections, Open questions, Affirmations, and Reflective Summaries.



How a youth feels one day may be different from how they feel the next. In fact, moving along the stages of change is one indicator that MI is working. The most effective programs invite youth to consider how behavior change is connected to what is most important to them, starting with their individual goals and values. When all team members develop skills in MI, they will be equipped to capitalize on **teachable moments** that offer opportunities for youth engagement, whenever and wherever they arise in the JDTC program (Lawson & Flocke, 2009).

Throughout the TAB, the authors use terms such as “adolescents,” “youth,” and “young people” interchangeably for the sake of variety. “Practitioner” and “JDTC team member” are used similarly. The reader will see references to the “fourth edition,” which is shorthand for Miller and Rollnick’s 2023 revision of the foundational textbook *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change and Grow*. The authors have retained references to the third edition, titled *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (2013), when relevant and applicable. For this publication, the authors use the term “change plan” to include court case plans and clinical treatment plans. Court case plans are designed to address the criminogenic needs of treatment court participants, and treatment plans are designed to address the clinical needs of patients. Content describing Motivational Interviewing practices will apply to both types of change plans.



Key Features of Motivational Interviewing

Definition of MI

Two equally important components make up effective MI practice: relational and technical (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). The relational components refer to the nonjudgmental and empathic environment that the practitioner creates for working with the adolescent. The technical components consist of methods designed to reflect, affirm, and cultivate change talk and soften sustain talk as the youth is engaged in the process of change. Notice the underlined relational components and the *italicized technical components* in the definition below:

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).

In the JDTC context, practitioners employ both relational and technical components within the program by inviting youth to verbalize their own reasons for change and connecting behavior change to goals and values of importance to the young person. Both components are essential in effective MI practice. Throughout this TAB, specific methods for implementing the relational and technical components of MI within the JDTC setting are described.

MI Is a Style of Communication

MI uses a **guiding** style of communication. With respect to the JDTC, practitioners use MI to convey support for the process and the endpoint of change. Miller and Rollnick (2023) use the analogy of a tour guide:

If you travel to a new country, you might hire a guide to help you on your way. You don't expect the guide to decide when you will arrive and leave or to order what you see and do. Neither do you expect the guide just to follow you around. The guide's job is to help you get where you want to go and do what *you* choose to do—safely, enjoyably, perhaps even economically. The guide's expertise is important, and so are your own goals and choices. A guide normally walks alongside, neither pulling from the front nor pushing from behind (p. 6).

A guiding style of communication is especially effective when a youth feels torn between two sides; that is, when they see reasons to change while also seeing reasons to stay the same. For example, a young person may understand that continued cannabis use is interfering with school, relationships, or probation requirements. At the same time, they might have come to rely on it to manage stress and feel overwhelmed at the thought of quitting. Guiding is situated between the directing and following styles of communication (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Directing refers to telling others what to do. In the court environment, judicial officers use the directing style of communication when they issue orders to do something or to abstain from doing something. Underlying the directing style of communication is the idea that professionals know what a youth needs and will tell the youth what to do. In this style, the youth's role is to comply, adhere, and obey.

The directing style, while often well-intentioned, tends to be less effective when the situation is complex. For example, if a youth shows minimal progress in outpatient substance use treatment, and probation identifies the need for residential care, pushing for compliance can undermine engagement. Without collaboration, the youth's fears, readiness, and voice may be overlooked, thus negatively



impacting the working alliance and lasting change. The directing style can be effective when a situation demands urgency and clear expectations, such as when a youth's safety is at risk. For example, if a young person survives a near-fatal overdose, a responsive plan is needed quickly. In such moments, direct communication ensures swift action and minimizes confusion.

Following is a style of communication used when the practitioner is facilitating a discussion without a particular goal in mind. MI conversations are goal oriented in the direction of change, which is why they fall between following and directing. Within the JDTC context, a team member may use following when discussing preferences for vocational or prosocial activities, for example. In this instance, the practitioner is not using the technical components of MI to influence the youth's specific choice, but rather is following along with their particular interests with the goal of guiding them toward making a choice.

As an alternative to the directing and following styles of communication, the guiding style of MI is also used by practitioners when they provide information to youth. The MI strategy Ask – Offer – Ask (AOA) is a structure for JDTC team members to share factual information in a way that respects a youth's existing knowledge and prioritizes the youth's interest. The AOA method for sharing information is described in detail in the Strategy for Sharing Information: Ask – Offer – Ask section of this TAB, where the format and sample dialogue are presented. Additionally, AOA is featured on a cue card.

The Spirit of MI Is Essential

The spirit of MI is fundamental to effectively bringing about behavior change. It embodies the relational part of MI and is defined by the acronym PACE: partnership, acceptance, compassion, and empowerment.

In a **partnership**, conversations about change occur between two experts: the practitioner and the youth who is an expert on themselves. A true partnership “is not an adversarial task like wrestling but is more like dancing in a ballroom with flowing motion, adjustments, and direction” (Miller & Rollnick, 2023, p. 8).

Acceptance is demonstrated by honoring the individual's absolute worth and potential as a human being. Drawing on Rogers' (1957) person-centered counseling, it shows unconditional regard for the person. Miller and Rollnick (2023) explain that “nonjudgmental acceptance is widely recognized and scientifically demonstrated to be a healing factor in psychotherapy” (p. 8). The practitioner acknowledges the adolescent's autonomy to make their own choices and affirms their strengths, abilities, values, efforts, and skills. This is a place where the fixing reflex mentioned later in this section can interfere, especially when the young person's behavior is concerning or dangerous. Miller and Rollnick (2023) note that acceptance does not necessarily mean approval. They point out a counterintuitive notion: “When people experience being accepted as they are, it becomes possible for them to change” (p. 8).

There are many paths toward recovery (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2012). Miller and Rollnick (2023) define **compassion** as “a benevolent intention toward the person's well-being” (p. 324). JDTC team members practicing compassion consider the way a youth prefers to carry out their change plan and robustly support it. As Miller and Rollnick (2023) explain, “MI is not about getting people to do things that *you* want them to do. With compassion, the prime directive is the best interest of the person whom you are helping. MI is compassion in action” (p. 9).

Empowerment replaces evocation in the MI spirit in the fourth edition of Miller and Rollnick's work (2023), where they define empowerment as “helping people realize and utilize their own strengths and abilities” (p. 326). It expands on the notion that people have what they need, and that the practitioner's



job is to elicit these inner resources rather than finding and fixing deficits or problems. They describe a surprising early finding in MI research showing that once people resolved their ambivalence about whether to make a change, they would generally implement the change on their own without additional professional intervention.

Youth choose to opt in to JDTC programs. While they are there, the MI practitioner actively promotes opportunities for the youth to make decisions and solve problems (Smith, 2025) in combination with the structure and resources of the program and staff members. Miller and Rollnick (2023) note that “directly acknowledging someone’s freedom of choice often diminishes defensiveness and can facilitate change” (p. 10). This kind of support for autonomy is a key factor in successful change.

To assess whether the MI spirit lives within various features of the JDTC program, such as the precourt staff meetings, court hearings, incentives, sanctions, and celebrations, team members are encouraged to consider the questions below:

- **Partnership:** How does the JDTC use a guiding style of communication? How does the team collaborate with the adolescent and their family on the change plans? Does the interaction look more like a dance than a wrestling match?
- **Acceptance:** How does the team recognize the adolescent’s absolute worth (not just the behavior) and the dignity of the adolescent’s autonomy? How does the team allow the adolescent to lead toward the change at hand?
- **Compassion:** How does the team actively promote the adolescent’s well-being within the context of their goals and values? How is this demonstrated in individual, precourt, and courtroom settings?
- **Empowerment:** How does the team affirm the young person’s autonomy by acknowledging their freedom of choice in relation to behavior change? How does the team avoid directing a change plan in favor of drawing out ideas from the adolescent?

Consideration of these questions will help the team keep the spirit of MI at the forefront of JDTC programming.

MI Recognizes Ambivalence, Cultivates Change Talk, and Softens Sustain Talk

The goal of MI is to strengthen an individual’s motivation for and commitment to specific behavior change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). When considering behavioral health changes such as those involving substance use, individuals are often ambivalent about making a change; that is, they have reasons to change as well as reasons to stay the same. MI recognizes that ambivalence is a natural part of the change process and employs specific strategies for both.

Change talk is any statement in the direction of change, while **sustain talk** refers to statements in favor of staying the same (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). During conversations with youth, JDTC team members can use MI spirit, skills, and strategies to **cultivate change talk** and **soften sustain talk** when talking with youth (Moyers et al., 2015). Table 1 defines the types of change talk—desire, ability, reason, need, commitment, activation, and taking steps—and gives an example of each. The acronym DARNCATs is used in MI training to help practitioners recall these categories. Through MI training, JDTC team members learn to attend to, invite, and strengthen youth change talk (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

**TABLE 1. Types, definitions, and examples of change talk (DARNCATs)**

TYPE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Desire	Desire to change	"I wish I could quit smoking."
Ability	Ability to change	"I stopped smoking weed before; I could probably do it again."
Reason	Reasons to change	"My mom would get off my back if I quit drinking."
Need	Urgency for change	"If I don't go to group, I won't make it to the next phase."
Commitment	Commitment to change	"I'm gonna take a different way home to avoid the park where my old friends hang out."
Activation	Leaning toward the direction of change	"I'm thinking about how I might stop drinking."
Taking steps	Specific actions toward change	"I'm starting to notice how hanging out with Alex is a high-risk situation for me."

Desire, ability, reason, and need (DARN) to change are collectively known as **preparatory change talk**. These four types indicate consideration of change and are often the first step in the process. **Mobilizing change talk**, on the other hand, consists of commitment, activation, and taking steps (CATs). Their presence in conversation signals that the person is moving toward change to a greater degree. Practitioners are encouraged to pay attention to all types of change talk, because "most research shows that all kinds of change talk favor subsequent change" (Miller & Rollnick, 2023, p. 88).

MI Sidesteps the Fixing Reflex

An impulse of a JDTC team member may be to fix problems and direct a youth toward a specific change plan. The practitioner may undertake such planning before understanding the youth's goals and values or the context in which the behavior is occurring. What might seem like an obvious need for change to an adult may not appear as urgent or clear to an adolescent. Jumping to conclusions and writing change plans prematurely can lead to the youth pushing back against change, which is the opposite of the practitioner's intended outcome. This well-intentioned impulse to emphasize the importance of change and persuade an individual about how to carry out the change is known as the **fixing reflex** (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

While the intention is to be helpful, the approach of the fixing reflex tends to elicit opposition, frustration, and disengagement on the part of the youth. Responses from youth, including *"That won't work for me," "I tried that already,"* and *"OK, I'll try that,"* followed by inaction, are all indicators that the fixing reflex may have entered the conversation. Another example occurs when team members find themselves telling the youth how to solve the problem or attempting to convince the youth that change is important. The fixing reflex tends to occur more frequently if team members perceive that the youth's health and safety are in danger. These situations have the potential to evoke genuine feelings of fear, frustration, and anger in adults working with youth, which can inadvertently result in the team member's communication style subtly switching from guiding to directing.

The practitioner can **sidestep the fixing reflex** by using the MI spirit, skills, and strategies designed to invite youth to verbalize their own motivation for change and create their own change plan. The method of MI evokes feelings of empowerment, self-efficacy, engagement, respect, and hope (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), the presence of which increases the likelihood that the youth will successfully enact the behavior change.



Summary of Key Features

This section presented the following main points:

- The relational and technical components of MI work together in conversations about change.
- People from a variety of educational backgrounds and lived experiences can learn MI.
- There is value in all JDTC team members learning MI concepts.
- The spirit of MI is exemplified through partnership, acceptance, compassion, and empowerment.
 - Nonjudgmental acceptance is a robust healing factor for change.
 - When people feel accepted for who they are, it becomes possible for them to change.
- People considering change often feel ambivalent at first; that is, they see reasons to stay the same (sustain talk) and reasons to change (change talk).
- MI views ambivalence as a natural part of the change process.
- The fixing reflex, however well-intentioned, is inconsistent with helping people change effectively.

Figure 1 displays a visual overview of MI concepts. They are summarized in the companion MI overview and cue cards as well. Each of these concepts and their associated skills and strategies as applied to the JDTC setting will be described in this TAB.

FIGURE 1. Motivational Interviewing Overview



The next section describes the theories and four tasks that inform how the MI spirit, skills, and strategies work to motivate youth toward change.



Understanding How MI Works To Help People Change

Familiarity with principles of adolescent development and the stages of change are essential for any practitioner working with youth in treatment for substance use disorders. Through their training as JPCs, treatment providers, peer mentors, or legal advocates for youth, many JDTC team members learn about these topics. Practitioners are encouraged to learn more about adolescent development, effective adolescent substance use treatment strategies, and the developing Recovery Capital for Adolescents Model initially described by Hennessy et al. (2019) to augment the information presented in this TAB. SAMHSA's 2019 edition of *Enhancing Motivation for Change in Substance Use Disorder Treatment* is a free reference for reading about the stages of change. Articles and books cited in this TAB are noted in the Reference List and are recommended to those seeking more depth or understanding in a subject area.

The spirit, skills, and strategies of MI are informed by several theories. Understanding these theories and the mechanisms of action with which they are associated facilitates understanding of the why and the how underlying MI practice.

Self-Determination Theory

Described by Ryan and Deci (2000), **self-determination theory (SDT)** suggests that humans pursue activities to meet three essential human needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. When individuals engage in activities that meet these needs, they experience self-motivation and psychological health.

SDT identifies two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Put simply, **intrinsic motivation** consists of factors relating to a person's desires, goals, and values that come from and reside within the individual. **Extrinsic motivation** refers to factors outside of the individual in the form of consequences, rewards, and social status that exert influence on the person (SAMHSA, 2019). Behavior that is intrinsically motivated tends to persist, as it generates reinforcing feelings of self-efficacy, competence, and excitement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Both types motivate people to change in varying degrees and lengths of time, and both are useful in a JDTC setting. Once youth become engaged in treatment through the external influences of helping professionals and the use of incentives and encouragement, the task for JDTC team members then shifts to evoking and enhancing the youth's intrinsic motivation for change (SAMHSA, 2019; Schiller et al., 2019).

Person-Centered Counseling

Person-centered counseling, and its underlying theory of human behavior, is an approach to therapy that seeks to nurture an individual's self-actualizing tendency. Such therapy is based on a belief that all people have an innate orientation toward growth and fulfillment (Rogers, 1980). The practitioner's ability to convey understanding of the youth's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors is referred to as **accurate empathy** (Moyers & Miller, 2013). According to Rogers (1957), accurate empathy is one of the critical conditions for change. It has endured over time as a vital part of the therapeutic alliance and contributes to better treatment outcomes.

Moyers and Miller (2013) note that "one of the largest determinants of client outcomes is the counselor who provides treatment" (p. 1). Studies have shown that even when treatment delivery was standardized and guided by manuals, differences in client outcomes occurred that appeared to be related to the counselor providing the services. Specifically, people who received substance use disorder treatment from a counselor with high empathy tended to have better outcomes, such as



treatment retention and decreased alcohol use (Miller & Moyers, 2015). Those who received treatment from a counselor with low empathy tended to experience increased dropout rates and returns to use, and less behavior change (Moyers & Miller, 2013).

In MI, accurate empathy is demonstrated through the use of reflective listening. To reflect, the practitioner says aloud what they think the adolescent means. The team member strategically uses reflections to guide the adolescent in talking about change. Reflective listening to express accurate empathy is a hallmark of person-centered approaches such as MI and is discussed in depth later in this TAB.

Self-Perception Theory

Self-perception theory (Bem, 1972) is based on the idea that people come to understand their own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs by observing their own behavior and the context in which their behavior occurs. This type of self-observation occurs in ambiguous situations, such as when a person feels ambivalent and is sorting out their perspective. For example, when a youth is considering changing their behavior, they see reasons to stay the same *and* reasons to change.

Rosengren (2018) notes, “In situations where people are unsure, having them talk in favor of a position causes their attitudes to shift in line with their arguments. In short, we come to believe that for which we argue” (pp. 267–268). When a practitioner invites an adolescent to talk about their desire, ability, reason, or need to change a behavior, the youth becomes the one who is arguing for change, and convincing themselves, as people tend to believe what they hear themselves say (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Note that the practice of engaging youth in talking about their own reasons for change is the opposite of lecturing, giving advice, or telling them how to change behavior. When a practitioner pushes for change, the adolescent is left with no choice but to take up the other side: reasons to stay the same. As the practitioner argues for the change, the youth begins listing reasons to stay the same and defending their position. This is exactly backward (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). In MI, we want the person making the change to verbalize their reasons to change.

Understanding the “Juvenile” in Juvenile Drug Treatment Court

Like many counseling approaches, MI first started as a treatment for adults. Evidence has grown for its efficacy with adolescents, who are engaged in a transitional process moving from childhood to adulthood. They have abilities, experiences, and tendencies that are distinct from both life phases as they develop their identities and grow their skills in thinking and planning ahead, social relationships, emotion regulation, problem solving, and decision making (Naar & Suarez, 2021; Smith, 2025). Throughout this TAB, examples are offered of ways in which practitioners implement MI specifically with youth.

Naar and Suarez (2021) suggest that development does not occur at the same pace for all adolescents. While some abilities can be roughly attributed to certain ages, it is important to view the youth as an individual. Given their age, youth do not have years of experience to draw from and genuinely may not have the language to explain or understand in the way adults do. One way to mitigate this is to be more concrete and specific when discussing topics, to give youth a place to start from. Later in this TAB, there’s a section on ways for the practitioner to respond when the youth says “I don’t know,” using reflective listening to get through such developmental obstacles.

During adolescence, familial relationships change as the youth seeks more independence and responsibility, and “friendships become a primary, albeit stressful part of the young person’s life” (Naar & Suarez, 2021, p. 22). Peer influence plays a significant role in an adolescent’s life in general, and especially with the initiation into substance use; the closer the friend, the greater the influence



(Hesselbrock & Hesselbrock, 2006). Understanding the function of the youth's substance use in the context of their social network, as well as their individual goals and values, sheds light onto behavior patterns that can be changed.

Advances in neuroscience have shown that the brain is in development until age 25. During this time, the limbic system is getting better at regulating emotion, the prefrontal cortex is improving executive functions such as planning ahead and self-control, and both are influenced by social experiences (Naar & Suarez, 2021). These profound changes may explain some impulsive and risk-taking behavior of adolescents. For example, consider the youth who stays out past curfew to hang out with friends. They are at risk of losing privileges to go out in the future, but the fear of missing out on fun social experiences in the short term feels overwhelming. While the adult might reason that there will be other opportunities to hang out with friends in the future, the adolescent chooses the excitement and pleasure of the "now."

More literature is emerging about the Recovery Capital for Adolescents Model (RCAM) originally described by Hennessy et al. (2019). It builds on the notion of recovery capital that started in the adult world in recognition of the time and supports needed for people to achieve and maintain recovery from substance use disorder. For adolescents, Hennessy et al. suggest four domains of adolescent recovery capital: human, financial, social, and community. Developmentally adapted for adolescents, these domains consist of the following:

- Human recovery capital, defined as individual characteristics of the adolescent such as self-efficacy, motivation, spiritual beliefs, mental health, and high school engagement.
- Financial recovery capital, meaning resources that support basic life needs such as access to food and shelter. For adolescents, parent/caregiver income, health insurance, and transportation all provide stability for basic needs.
- Social recovery capital, including relationships with other people in the adolescent's life such as family, peers, friends, teachers, and coaches, as well as engagement in prosocial fun activities. For youth in recovery from substance use disorder, sober significant others play an important role, as does participating in valued leisure activities during free time.
- Community recovery capital is the broadest domain and refers to the availability of adolescent-specific options such as sober support groups, recovery high schools, and treatment centers in relatively close proximity to the youth's home.

The RCAM offers domains specific to youth that may inform change planning and setback prevention in JDTC programs. When developing change plans and discussing setbacks, tailor opportunities to build adolescent recovery capital to the youth's strengths, needs, and interests.

With its focus on emphasizing autonomy, developing self-efficacy, and eliciting solutions from the youth, MI is a good fit for adolescents who are in a life phase that involves cultivating skills in decision making, learning about what is important to them, and beginning to imagine their lives as emerging adults (Naar & Suarez, 2021; Smith, 2025). Conversations about change with youth are more effective when viewed through the cognitive, social, and emotional stages of adolescent development and the RCAM.

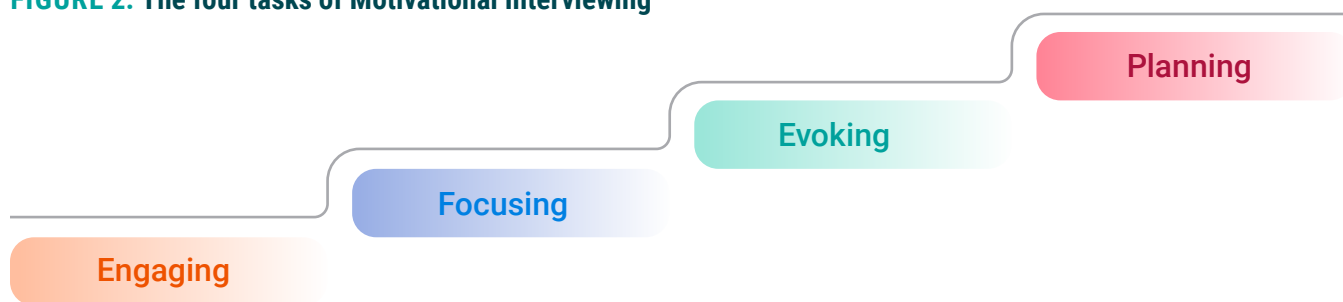


The Four Tasks

The **four tasks of MI** detail a road map for change (depicted in Figure 2 and in the companion MI overview card). A team member's first stop is to engage and build trust with the youth. Once a rapport is established, the practitioner and adolescent collaborate on one or more goals to focus the change conversation. Once the goal has been established, the team member 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.

Note that while the tasks are described as separate, there may be times when an earlier task is revisited. For example, if the young person gets to the evoking task on a specific behavior change and doesn't feel it is important anymore, the practitioner might return to engaging or focusing to identify another topic. Miller and Rollnick (2023) write, "In practice, these tasks overlap and blend. Think of them as stairsteps on which you can move up or down" as indicated by the adolescent (p. 22).

FIGURE 2. The four tasks of Motivational Interviewing



The First Task: Engaging

Engaging is the first task in MI and the prerequisite for everything that follows. It sets the foundation for effective conversations about change and establishes a **working alliance** between the practitioner and youth (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). In the context of the JDTC, engagement involves multiple avenues and different practitioners on the team. The attorneys, JPC, coordinator, treatment provider, and judge will all have initial and ongoing interactions with the youth. In turn, the youth will have varying degrees of engagement with each team member throughout the program.

In the JDTC program, the team member's task is to strategically promote engagement with the adolescent. This includes understanding the various external stressors and factors affecting both the team member and the youth. A team member can increase engagement with a youth by using a guiding style of communication with the core skills of MI that are described later in this TAB.

One specific way to engage is by **asking for examples or elaboration**. The practitioner invites the young person to elaborate on their experience with a specific behavior, topic, or activity. Example or elaboration questions that begin with "Tell me about..." and "Describe..." convey the team member's sincere interest in learning more about the youth's individual experience. In the context of JDTCs, example and elaboration questions help team members understand the youth's perspective and convey accurate empathy.

Consider this: If a parent asks an adolescent to clean their room, two different definitions of what constitutes a clean room might be operating. The parent might assume that a clean room means that clothes are picked up off the floor, laundry is put away, the bed is made, and the floor is vacuumed.



The youth might think pushing the clothes under the bed and stuffing things into the closet is sufficient. Asking for examples and elaboration prevents this kind of confusion and promotes shared understanding between the youth and JDTC team.

Samples of asking for elaboration or examples in action follow:

- *“Tell me what you like about smoking marijuana.”*
- *“What are the not-so-good things about smoking marijuana?”*
- *“Describe a time you felt nervous and handled it.”*
- *“Tell me about the last time you drank more than you intended.”*

These questions elicit context essential to understanding the youth’s individual experience. Through engagement, the practitioner may convey acceptance and accurate empathy, as described in the MI spirit. Remember that acceptance is different than agreement or approval; rather, it is an understanding of the world as the youth sees it.

ACTION TIPS FOR ENGAGING

- Ask for elaboration or examples to understand the youth’s experiences.
- Convey acceptance and accurate empathy from the MI spirit through engaging.
- Sidestep the fixing reflex and listen to understand the young person’s perspective.

The Second Task: Focusing

Engagement prepares the foundation of the working alliance, which allows the team member to guide the adolescent toward the second task of MI: **focusing**. The focusing task connects conversations about change to a specific purpose and outcome. In the JDTC context, expectations of the youth to work toward abstinence or harm reduction are predetermined through the JDTC contract, phase, and goal structure. Even with the JDTC framework of conditions and expectations, the team member can still bolster autonomy by having the youth choose what change to make first and how to go about it.

A case plan to address the youth’s risk and treatment needs may feel overwhelming to a JDTC participant. It is the practitioner’s job to partner with the youth to sharpen their focus on specific aspects of the plan to help make goals more achievable, more immediate, and less daunting. Team members such as the JPC and treatment provider will more often work with a youth on the task of focusing, although focusing may be part of brief interactions between the youth and the judge, prosecutor, or coordinator. (For more information on focusing and case planning, see Schiller et al., [2019].)

Collaborative agenda setting is one specific way in which the practitioner focuses the session. It conveys a summary of the topics for the session and then asks the youth to contribute topics of importance to them (Naar & Suarez, 2021). This method structures the session and prioritizes the youth’s interests. See an example of collaborative agenda setting in Dialogue 4, Dealing with a Slip: Chris and the Treatment Provider, later in this TAB.

ACTION TIPS FOR FOCUSING

- Recognize that ambivalence about change is natural.
- Consider goals that might build self-efficacy.
- Use collaborative agenda setting to start the conversation. Essentially, the practitioner says something like, *“This is what’s on my agenda for today. What topics are on your mind?”*



The Third Task: Evoking

The task of **evoking** is a hallmark of MI practice and involves key skills of attending to, inviting, and strengthening change talk (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Practitioners first tune their ears to recognize change talk, which are youth statements in the direction of change described earlier as DARNCATs. Next, practitioners use strategies that invite the youth to verbalize change talk. When youth say aloud their desire, reason, ability, and need to change, they talk themselves into changing (Rosengren, 2018). Lastly, practitioners reflect, affirm, and summarize the change talk they heard from the youth to strengthen it. The technical goal of MI is to cultivate change talk and soften sustain talk. Strategies for both are described in detail, along with examples and sample dialogues to illustrate their use during JDTC change conversations, later in this TAB.

Team members such as the JPC and treatment provider are more likely to work with the youth in the evoking task. Judges, prosecutors, and coordinators can also look for opportunities to elicit the youth's motivation to change during the brief interactions that they have with them.

ACTION TIPS FOR EVOKING

- Attend to change talk by recognizing DARNCATs.
- Use strategies to cultivate change talk from the youth, as described later in this TAB.
- Strengthen change talk by reflecting, affirming, and summarizing it, selectively.

The Fourth Task: Planning

The fourth task is **planning**. In working with young people, practitioners may have a plan in mind for the youth after reading an assessment. Planning within an MI framework is built on the foundation of engagement, focusing on specific topics, and evoking goals and values that are important to the adolescent.

As the tasks build on each other, the MI practitioner listens for indicators that the youth may be ready to transition from one to the next. Signals that the youth may be ready to move from evoking to planning include (a) the presence of more change talk than sustain talk, (b) mobilizing change talk, and (c) youth verbalizations of steps they might take to make the change (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). It is important to be aware of the fixing reflex, especially in the planning task, where there may be a desire to quickly develop a plan. Consistent with the MI approach, the emphasis is on guiding the youth toward creating their change plan. The practitioner empowers the youth through brainstorming and discussing possible options without inadvertently introducing pressure to commit to one prematurely (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

For JDTC team members, creating an initial, iterative, and collaborative change plan with the youth increases their sense of self-efficacy and assures that the plan is truly individualized (Schiller et al., 2019). Build the domains of adolescent recovery capital into the plan, tailoring it to their specific needs and resources. Once a plan is developed, revisit it regularly to elicit what is working well and what might need more work. A change plan is a work in progress, and throughout implementation some parts may be unexpectedly easy or hard. Listen for opportunities to affirm efforts, connect goals and values to the change, and identify areas of additional support. The planning task is likely to be used by the JPC and treatment provider with other team members involved in regular reviews and information sharing.



ACTION TIPS FOR PLANNING

- Draw from the RCAM to inform change planning and setback prevention.
- Elicit and affirm strengths, efforts, goals, and values connected to the change plan.
- Identify specific people who will support the youth with their plan.
- Generate a menu of options for how the youth might go about implementing the changes.
- Share information using Ask – Offer – Ask (discussed later in this TAB) regarding strategies to strengthen commitment.

Summary of How MI Works To Help People Change

This section covered several main points on understanding the theories and tasks of MI:

- Self-determination theory identifies three essential human needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.
- There are two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Behavior that is intrinsically motivated tends to persist and is likely to live within the youth's individual goals and values.
- Accurate empathy is one of the critical conditions for change, according to person-centered counseling. In MI, accurate empathy is demonstrated by reflective listening.
- Self-perception theory recognizes the power of talking oneself into changing.
- Practitioners may tailor change conversations with youth to align with an understanding of adolescent development.
- The RCAM highlights four domains of recovery capital that may inform change planning and setback prevention specific to youth: human, financial, social, and community. Slips may indicate the need to strengthen one or more areas.
- The road map for change follows four tasks that build on each other: engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning.
- Engaging builds a working alliance and is the foundation for all that follows. The quality of the helping relationship is connected to treatment outcomes.
- Focusing identifies a goal to start with and is a prerequisite for the evoking task.
- Collaborative agenda setting ensures that youth have input into session topics.
- Evoking is a hallmark of MI practice and involves key skills of attending to, cultivating, and strengthening change talk.
- Indicators that the youth may be ready to transition from evoking to planning include (a) the presence of more change talk than sustain talk, (b) mobilizing change talk, and (c) verbalizations of steps the youth might take to make the change. Embrace the spirit of MI and be aware of the fixing reflex during the planning task.

The next section presents the core skills of MI, defining each in terms of function and mechanics while providing specific examples relevant to JDTC work.



Core Skills in MI: ROARS

Readers familiar with MI will recognize the commonly used acronym OARS as referring to the core skills of Open questions, Affirmations, Reflections, and Summaries. In this TAB, we adopt Smith's (2025) acronym ROARS as the core skills instead: Reflections, Open questions, Affirmations, and Reflective Summaries (presented in Table 2). Smith suggests moving reflections to the front, "as MI increasingly emphasizes reflections, and the quality of reflections" as a marker of proficiency in MI (p. 39). Reflective listening is a hallmark of MI practice and represents the biggest shift for learners, who are taught to strategically increase reflections and reduce closed questions in effective conversations about change.

The technical goals of MI are to cultivate change talk and soften sustain talk. The core skills, along with the spirit of MI, form the relational components through which the practitioner guides the change conversation. Each skill has a purpose and is described with examples. Action tips provide options for using the skill right away.

TABLE 2. The Core Skills of Motivational Interviewing

Core Skill	Function
Reflections	State aloud 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.
Open questions	Elicit the youth's perspective and evoke change talk. They function differently in each of the four tasks.
Affirmations	Reflect a youth's strengths, abilities, values, efforts, and skills. Affirmations add wind to a youth's sails, motivating forward movement. The intention is to build self-efficacy and state aloud qualities in the youth that contribute to successful change.
Reflective summaries	Combine reflections and affirmations 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 topic or session with a summary plus key question , as indicated.

Reflections

Rosengren (2018) describes reflective listening as follows:

Reflective listening is *the primary skill* on which MI is built. It is the mechanism through which practitioners convey their interest, empathy, and understanding of clients. Practitioners can express acceptance of the client and gently challenge positions; they can encourage greater exploration or a shift away from a problematic statement. Reflective listening is typically used to engage clients and create momentum, which can then be channeled in directions that are productive (p. 70).

Reflections are a hallmark of MI-based interactions. They are statements about what the practitioner thinks the person means (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Reflections allow the practitioner to strategically highlight change talk and invite the client to elaborate and clarify as they continue thinking and talking.



Reflections demonstrate understanding of the client's perspective, conveying *accurate empathy*, which is one of Carl Rogers' critical conditions for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Rogers, 1957).

Reflections show that the team member is listening. They invite the adolescent to clarify and say more if the practitioner's reflection is not quite right. Regardless of whether the reflection is accurate or a little off, the youth will provide confirmation, clarification, or elaboration.

There are two levels of reflections: simple and complex, the key distinction being how close they stay to what the youth said. In addition to the levels of reflections, there are three distinct types of complex reflections that focus on feelings, ambivalence (known as double-sided reflections), and the use of metaphors. Table 3 summarizes the different types of reflections and provides examples of their use.

Simple reflections stay close to what the person said, using the same or similar words as the adolescent used (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Naar & Suarez, 2021). They are particularly useful when a youth is agitated. Simple reflections can validate strong emotions and calm the youth down. Too many in a row, however, can elicit irritation and frustrated exclamations of, *"I just said that!"* (Naar & Suarez, 2021). Repeated use of simple reflections may make it feel like the conversation is going in circles. To step off the "merry-go-round," aim for complex reflections (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Complex reflections "add some meaning or emphasis to what the person has said, making a guess about the unspoken content or what might come next" (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, pp. 57–58). Complex reflections move the conversation forward. They go beyond the person's statements to continue the paragraph and invite elaboration. The following are three specific types of complex reflections.

In **reflections of feeling**, the practitioner names the emotion they think the youth might be experiencing. Teens may find it hard to express feelings directly and in words. Nonverbal communication, tone of voice, and posture are clues as to how a youth may be feeling. Even if the practitioner hasn't guessed correctly, offering a reflection of feeling gives the youth something from which to work and react.

Double-sided reflections recognize ambivalence. For example, the practitioner might say, *"On the one hand, smoking weed with your friends is fun, and on the other, it's getting you into some trouble."* The use of *"on the one hand [insert sustain talk]"* and *"on the other hand [insert change talk]"* is strategic. Using *"and"* rather than *"but"* is especially important here: *"But"* negates what came before it, negating the sustain talk, while *"and"* respects both sustain talk and change talk (Rosengren, 2018). Further, double-sided reflections are an example of using sustain talk strategically. With this type of reflection, the practitioner acknowledges sustain talk and ends with the change talk; strategically, the practitioner's efforts are aimed at cultivating change talk, and the person will likely continue talking about the last thing the practitioner said.

Metaphor reflections provide a visual model for understanding. Statements such as *"You can see the light at the end of the tunnel,"* and *"You're ready to get back on track"* are memorable and often stick with a youth after leaving a session. Effective metaphors should be relevant to the youth. What might make sense to one person may not translate well to another. As always, the youth will provide the best feedback about the impact of a given metaphor.

As you read the examples in Table 3, imagine what the young person might say in response. Think about how the conversation might continue and what information the reflection may elicit.

**TABLE 3. Examples of simple and complex reflections**

Type of Reflection	Features of This Type of Reflection	Responses to: “I’d like to get my grades up.”
Simple	- Stays close to what the youth says. - Restates using the same words or rephrases using similar words. - Use sparingly.	“You’d like to get better grades.” “You wish you could improve your grades.”
Complex	- Goes beyond what the person says. - Adds meaning. - Connects goals or values to change. - Moves the conversation forward.	“Some subjects are easier than others.” “You’ve been struggling in school.” “Something’s getting in your way.”
Feeling	- Adds an affective component. - Reflects emotion you think the person might be feeling.	“You’re worried about what might happen if you don’t get your grades up.” “This is bothering you a bit.”
Double-sided	- Acknowledges both sides of ambivalence: sustain talk and change talk. - End with change talk to guide the person in talking about change.	“On the one hand, you’re not sure where to start, and on the other, some good things might happen if your grades improved.”
Metaphor	- Offers a visual model for thinking about the situation or behavior change. - Provides another way of understanding that might spark new ideas.	“You’re looking toward the finish line.” “You’ve got your eyes on the prize.” “You can see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

One specific way for JDTC team members to begin developing their skills in MI is by adding reflections to their conversations with youth. Many conversations consist of an adult asking questions and the youth answering them. Being asked a series of questions can feel like an interrogation, especially to an adolescent; the unintended impact is that the youth provides short answers and waits for the adult to ask another question. This beginning **reflection-to-question ratio** of 1:1 is a solid start; practitioners may increase the number of reflections as their skills continue to improve.

The type of reflection matters as well. JDTC team members are encouraged to aim for more reflections to be complex rather than simple (Miller & Rollnick, 2013; Rosengren, 2018; SAMHSA, 2019). Note that complex reflections do not need to be wordy to be effective; they go beyond what the youth said, adding meaning to which the youth will respond. Complex reflections allow the JDTC team member to guide the conversation forward while inviting the youth to continue thinking and talking. Recall the concept of self-perception theory: people talk themselves into changing when given the opportunity to verbalize their thoughts and ideas. A sample dialogue presented later in this TAB briefly demonstrates how reflections function within conversations about change.

Notice the Stems

In conversations about change, practitioners might preface reflections with phrases such as “*It sounds like...*,” “*I hear you saying that...*,” “*If I hear you right...*,” or “*So...*.” These kinds of sentence starters are called “stems.” While it is not wrong to use stems, there is a tendency to overuse them. This can result in the youth tuning out the well-intentioned practitioner or in the youth feeling “therapized” (Naar &



Suarez, 2021; Rosengren, 2018). Either risks increasing discord between the practitioner and the youth, which can jeopardize the working alliance.

Team members may choose to use stems to show respect or to avoid feeling that they are putting words in the person's mouth. Naar and Suarez (2021) state that the practitioner may choose to use a stem like *"You're saying..."* and *"I'm hearing..."* with younger adolescents, participants who are more concrete in their thinking, or adolescents who might mistake reflections as the practitioner condoning a behavior. Practitioners learning MI are encouraged to notice their use of stems and be thoughtful about the purpose and frequency. The best source of feedback to the MI practitioner is the young person they are working with; notice how the person responds to the style and adjust as needed.

ACTION TIPS FOR REFLECTIONS

- To reflect, state aloud what you think the youth means.
- Aim for at least one reflection after every question to start.
- Notice the stems. Try starting sentences with *"You feel..."* and *"You think..."* instead.
- When in doubt, reflect.
- If the conversation feels like it is going in circles, add more complex reflections.

Open Questions

Open questions seek to evoke longer answers as opposed to yes/no or short answers. In MI, open questions are key to eliciting the youth's perspective and change talk, whereas closed questions tend to gather specific pieces of information. Open questions are designed to empower the individual answering the questions to actively shape the agenda and direction of the conversation. It encourages youth to share what is on their minds rather than responding to what is on the mind of the person asking the question.

Open questions create the environment that MI seeks to cultivate: one that is person centered and connected to behavior change. In the context of JDTCs, when team members use open questions they bring youth into collaborating on change. Open questions enable the youth to do the majority of the talking, sharing background, context, and aspects of the topic that are important to them and may not have occurred to the practitioner to ask about. They ensure that the youth has input into the direction of the conversation.

Contrasting Closed and Open Questions

Closed questions are used to gather specific information. Such questions drill down on details and they have a particular effect on the conversation. The person asking the questions directs the conversation and generally gives few opportunities for the other person to influence what topics are covered. In the JDTC context, when a team member asks a youth a closed question, the youth will answer the question and wait for the JDTC team member to ask the next question. A youth answering a series of closed questions can feel like they are being interrogated even when that is not the intention. This cycle of questioning and answering is known as the **question-and-answer trap** (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). It is something practitioners avoid in MI.

Table 4 describes the differences between closed and open questions. Notice the contrast between what is elicited and the specific words that begin the questions.

**TABLE 4. Contrasting closed and open questions**

Closed Questions	Open Questions
Used often in the directing style of communication.	Used often in the guiding style of communication.
Answered with <i>yes</i> , <i>no</i> , or a short response.	Answered with longer responses.
Gather narrowly defined information.	Elicit broad information, potentially introducing new aspects of the topic.
Start with <i>have</i> , <i>do</i> , <i>are</i> , and <i>can</i> .	Start with <i>what</i> , <i>how</i> , <i>describe</i> , and <i>tell me about</i> .

Please note that there are times when closed questions are useful. When assessing risk or suicidal ideation, for example, it is important to obtain clear answers and specific information. The point of this section is to increase awareness of the two types of questions and highlight the function of open questions in conversations about change.

Open Questions Within the Four Tasks

Using open questions effectively calls for strategically tailoring them to the four tasks: engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning. In many conversations about change, the practitioner jumps right into planning questions in a well-intentioned effort to find and fix the problem. The youth in the JDTC program may be at different stages of change for different problems, and this approach can elicit pushback or reluctant agreement. For example, a youth might recognize that their use of alcohol is dangerous, especially if they have experienced consequences such as blacking out or doing something embarrassing in front of their friends while intoxicated; however, they might view marijuana as more helpful than harmful, as in assisting with relaxation or getting to sleep at night. These two substances require different approaches. Jumping right to how the youth plans to stop using substances altogether may result in short-term compliance, discord, or disengagement. For persistent change to occur, the team member will begin conversations about change with engaging.

Open questions for **engaging** seek to understand the context in which the behavior change may occur, as well as the youth's perspective. Open questions for **focusing** elicit topics to address in a session or behaviors the youth is most ready to begin discussing. With these, the team member can avoid a **premature focus trap** in which the team member pushes one change goal while the youth pushes back against it. Remember that when the team member argues for change, the youth is left to take up the argument for not changing, which is exactly backward (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

Open questions in the **evoking** task invite the youth to imagine what the change might look like without feeling pressured into committing to it prematurely. These are also known as strategies to cultivate change talk and include the change rulers, looking forward or backward, exploring goals and values, and other strategies described in depth later in this TAB.

Lastly, open questions in the **planning** task elicit a **menu of options** from which the youth may consider several solutions and think through the benefits and barriers each one might pose. Team members are encouraged to view developing a plan as a beginning step in carrying out change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). It will likely need to be evaluated and adjusted over time, and team members will want to affirm the youth's efforts, foster the youth's sense of self-efficacy, and strengthen intrinsic motivation along the way.

Examples of open questions within each task appear in Table 5. Note the different types of information each question might elicit and how it relates to the specific task.

**TABLE 5. Examples of open questions in the four tasks**

Task	Example of an Open Question
Engaging	"Tell me how you're doing in your high school classes."
Focusing	"We've got 30 minutes today. What would you like to focus on?"
Evoking	<i>Asking evocative questions about DARNCATs (DESIRE):</i> "What do you hope to get out of the drug court program?"
Planning	"What are some ways that work for you to keep track of your court dates?"

If the youth initially responds to an open question with *"I don't know,"* try making the question more specific. The youth may not know how to answer questions that are too general. For example, asking, *"What do you want to change about your life?"* might elicit a shoulder shrug from an adolescent because the scope is too broad. On the other hand, asking, *"How might your life be different if you changed your substance use?"* focuses on a specific topic while still being open, and makes answering much easier for the youth.

Adolescents, by the nature of their stage in development, are in the process of maturing, gaining life experiences, and growing their decision-making abilities (Naar & Suarez, 2021; Smith, 2025). This fact makes it even more important to guide adolescents in anticipating the benefits and potential barriers of the change plan before expecting them to implement it fully and successfully. A practitioner's role is to connect a young person's present mindset with their aspirations for the future, using the youth's own goals and values as a guide.

ACTION TIPS FOR OPEN QUESTIONS

- Observe how frequently you use closed and open questions in conversations with youth.
- Open up your questions. Start with *"What..."*, *"How..."*, *"Tell me about..."*, or *"Describe..."*
- Notice the youth's response when you ask open questions.
- Match your open question to the task in which you're working. See the ROARS cue card for prompts.

Affirmations

Affirmations are statements of a youth's strengths, abilities, values, efforts, actions, and skills. They bolster a youth's developing sense of self-efficacy, which is the belief that they will be successful if they decide to make a change (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Rosengren, 2018). Just as there are simple and complex levels of reflections, the fourth (2023) edition of Miller and Rollnick's work recognizes simple and complex levels of affirmations by expanding on the idea first presented by Miller and Moyers (2021).

Simple affirmations are reflections of something the person has said or done that is commendable or noteworthy. Similar to 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 to the individual. They go deeper than actions to recognize enduring strengths or values the person possesses (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Affirmations are different from praise, as shown in Table 6. Despite being well intentioned, statements of praise imply evaluation of one person by the other (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Praise is general and could be the same for everyone. An affirmation, on the other hand, is meaningful, is specific, and represents genuine recognition of the youth's own actions, efforts, strengths, abilities, values, and skills.

**TABLE 6. Comparing praise with simple and complex affirmations**

Praise	Simple Affirmations	Complex Affirmations
“Great job!” “That’s awesome!” “You’re a rock star!”	“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.”

Praising clients is not wrong; however, it serves a different purpose than affirmations and is more about the relationship between the practitioner and the youth. In contrast, affirmations are focused on the adolescent. Imagine the effect on a young person as they hear their strengths, abilities, values, efforts, actions, and skills recognized and reflected back to them in a genuine, specific, and meaningful manner (Rosengren, 2018).

In a study looking at which specific individual therapist behaviors elicited client change talk and sustain talk in MI, affirmations were the only core skill 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. Given their potential impact, learning to deliver accurate, specific, and meaningful affirmations is a useful skill for all JDTC team members to develop.

For youth, having tangible materials for affirmation and values exploration provides structure for an effective conversation (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Naar & Suarez, 2021). Looking through a list from which youth developing a sense of self may identify and learn about their unique qualities and strengths can jump-start the conversation. The Affirmations cue card lists adolescent-specific characteristics and values to prompt practitioners in delivering effective affirmations.

ACTION TIPS FOR USING AFFIRMATIONS

- Use “You...” rather than “I...” to keep the focus on the youth.
- State the affirmation as a fact.
- Think of a young person you are working with. Use the Affirmations cue card to identify a few of their strengths or values.
- Reflect *one* specific action, effort, strength, ability, value, or skill at a time. Give the young person a chance to talk after the affirmation, and reflect what you hear them say. You get more of what you reflect.
- Notice the impact of a meaningful affirmation on the youth, particularly the language that follows.
- Use tools in a session, such as the Affirmations cue card, to prompt ideas.



Reflective Summaries

Reflective summaries are statements and affirmations organized around themes from the conversation. Periodically summarizing the main points of what the youth has said communicates that the team member is listening closely. Reflective summaries structure the conversation, organize the youth's experience, and ensure that the conversation stays focused on the goal behavior.

In forming reflective summaries, the practitioner emphasizes certain elements of what the youth has said, with particular attention to change talk, affirmations, and connections between behavior change and goals or values of importance to the person. With a youth who expresses ambivalence, the summary can begin with a brief acknowledgment of their sustain talk, moving into a deeper reflection of their change talk, while guiding the conversation toward change.

Reflective summaries may be used to **develop discrepancy** between a youth's current behavior and their goals and values to evoke an internal tension that they feel motivated to resolve (Rosengren, 2018). This can amplify or create ambivalence as the youth thinks about the two opposing statements. Note that the practitioner does not interpret or point this out to the youth; rather, they reflect both and invite the youth to consider what they think the discrepancy means. Beware of the fixing reflex here; it is important for the youth to verbalize the connection if they see one. This type of reflective summary is demonstrated in the Linking column in Table 7.

Remember, the guiding aspect of MI seeks to tip the balance toward change. Reflective summaries in conversations about change typically place more weight on change talk than on sustain talk. Miller and Rollnick (2013) describe three types of reflective summaries, each serving a different purpose: collecting, linking, and transitional. Table 7 provides a description and example of each type.

TABLE 7. Types, features, and examples of reflective summaries

	Collecting	Linking	Transitional
Features	• Focuses on the present. • Gathers related topics. • May use "What else?" to add topics until the person is finished.	• Connects past and present information. • Develops discrepancy by inviting the youth to consider how their current behavior is or is not consistent with their goals and values.	• Wraps up a task or topic, capitalizing on momentum to move forward, switch topics, or end a session. • Sets up a key question.
Example	"We've talked about how marijuana is stressing your relationship with your mom. It's getting in the way of school, too."	"You've previously mentioned wanting to work in technology. You've been enjoying the coding class until recently, when you've missed the last few sessions."	"Today we talked about how "all work and no play" may have led to a slip. We found a gap in your recovery plan that could use some strengthening, as we know that having something fun to do where you can meet other people who have similar interests and goals builds recovery capital. Your awareness of high-risk situations, like the one you just experienced, is growing. What might be the next step?"



An effective summary sets the stage for a **key question**, which is a particular type of open question that capitalizes on momentum and assesses the impact of the conversation.

- “What do you think you **might** do?”
- “Where does all this leave you?”
- “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 the youth to imagine their options without feeling pressured.

The youth may respond to the key question with sustain talk, change talk, or a bit of both. The JDTC team member responds strategically depending on which type of language the youth uses:

- If the answer consists of sustain talk, the youth is still ambivalent, meaning they haven’t yet decided to make the change. In this case, interventions remain focused on **building awareness**, with topics such as understanding substance use behavior, evaluating the pros and cons, and exploring substance use in relation to the person’s goals and values (SAMHSA, 2019).
- If the answer contains change talk, it is a signal that the ambivalence scale has tipped toward change and the youth has moved forward, even slightly, in readiness to consider change. The conversation that follows should invite the young person to **envision what the change might look like** without feeling pressured to carry it out. Topics may include discussing in more depth the potential barriers to solve, the resources needed, and supports they can draw from should they decide to make the change.

The intentions of the key question are to capitalize on the momentum of the conversation and assess the balance of change talk and sustain talk. Strategies to soften sustain talk and cultivate change talk will be useful here and are discussed in the next section.

ACTION TIPS FOR REFLECTIVE SUMMARIES

- Use reflective summaries to highlight change talk and affirm the youth’s goals and values.
- Begin a session with a brief reflective summary highlighting change talk and affirmations from the previous session.
- Aim to close conversations with a reflective summary plus a key question to assess the impact of the conversation.

Summary of the Core Skills in MI: ROARS

This section offered several key points about ROARS as core skills of MI:

- Reflections convey accurate empathy, which is a critical condition for change.
- Adding reflections into conversations is a first step toward developing MI skills.
- Powerful reflections are clear and succinct, and tend to start with “You... .”
- Open questions elicit the relevant background, context, and aspects of the topic that are important to the youth and may not have occurred to the practitioner to ask.
- Affirmations are associated with increased change talk and decreased sustain talk.



- Affirmations are distinct from praise; they are specific reflections of the youth's strengths, skills, abilities, values, actions, or effort.
- Reflective summaries emphasize certain elements of youth language, highlighting affirmations and change talk.
- The summary plus key question combination assesses the impact of the conversation and informs subsequent strategies.
- Practitioners are encouraged to aim for half of their reflections to be complex, and for a beginning reflection-to-question ratio of 1:1. The reflections can increase to 2:1 and greater as the practitioner improves their reflective listening skills.

The next section describes strategies for navigating specific situations in MI and presents annotated sample dialogues to illustrate the flow of MI conversations.



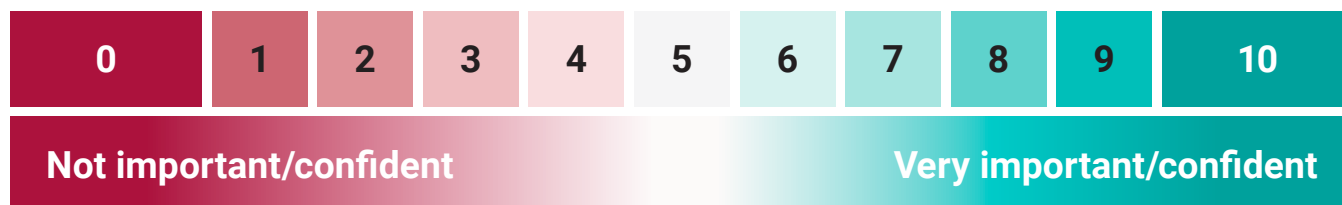
Strategies for Navigating Specific Situations in MI

Building on the theory, spirit, and skills of MI, what follows are descriptions and examples of MI strategies in action. The ROARS skills described earlier combine with the strategies presented here to achieve specific purposes. The strategies include cultivating change talk by using specific types of open questions, sharing information, responding to sustain talk, reflecting your way through “I don’t know” responses from youth, and dealing with a setback. As a reminder, the term “change plan” applies to both court case plans and clinical treatment plans.

Strategies for Cultivating Change Talk: Specific Types of Open Questions

As noted earlier, self-perception theory states that people are convinced by what they hear themselves say; as applied to behavior change, this means that people talk themselves into change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). The goal of the JDTC team member is to facilitate a conversation in which the youth is the one talking about change, generating options for the change plan, and building self-efficacy through the process. Quality open questions guide the youth in imagining what change might look like without feeling pressured into implementing a plan right away, provided the conversation occurs within an atmosphere of partnership, acceptance, compassion, and empowerment. Each strategy uses open questions to elicit change talk. These strategies with examples are summarized in Table 8 as well as the cue card on Strategies for Cultivating Change Talk.

Change rulers are a strategy consisting of two parts designed to elicit the perceived importance of behavior change to a person (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Naar & Suarez, 2021). The first part of the strategy asks the youth to rate how important the change is to them on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 meaning not at all important and 10 being extremely important. The second part of the strategy evokes the reasons the youth chose the particular number in comparison to a lower number. Implicit in the use of the ruler is inviting the youth to articulate specific change talk.



Change rulers are used regularly in MI, Motivational Enhancement Therapy, and brief interventions, all of which have an evidence base for reducing substance use. To use this strategy in a JDTC context, the practitioner asks, “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 JDTC team member follows up with the second part of the two-part strategy: “What makes you a 6 and not a 2?” The youth answers with change talk; that is, the youth describes the reasons why making the change is important.

The same two-part strategy may be used to elicit perceived confidence as well (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Naar & Suarez, 2021). It is not uncommon for a person to rate importance higher than confidence. Continuing with the example above, the first question would be: “On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all confident and 10 means extremely confident, how **confident** are you that you could change your use of marijuana?” Again, the youth answers with a number and the practitioner asks the second part of the strategy: “What makes you a 3 and not a 0?” Similarly, the answer evokes the reasons the person feels confident they could make the change.



When the youth rates the importance or confidence as a low number, such as a 3, another potential follow-up question is to ask, *“What might it take to inch you up to a 3.5?”* (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Naar & Suarez, 2021; SAMHSA, 2019). Note that this question elicits what might have to happen to increase the perceived importance or confidence of changing the behavior without adding too much pressure.

The choice of follow-up question is significant in this strategy. Asking *“Why aren’t you a 10?”* is not advised, because it will elicit sustain talk, where the youth lists all of the reasons they cannot make the change. MI practitioners do not ignore sustain talk; rather, they think strategically about what type of response their question will elicit. Decades of research into the effectiveness of MI tell us that *“it matters what clients say during treatment: increases in change talk (relative to sustain talk) are associated with subsequent change”* (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, pp. 170–171).

Scaling questions such as those explored above quickly gauge importance and confidence. While they are traditionally used in the beginning of treatment to get a sense for the youth’s initial thoughts, they can also be revisited occasionally as a check-in. In addition, they can be used to discuss different substances. Youth may feel one way about alcohol and another way about marijuana, for example. Change conversations are an art and a science; remember that the best source of feedback is the young person sitting across from you. If this strategy yields productive conversation, use it. If not, there are many other strategies to evoke change talk (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Exploring extremes is another strategy consisting of two parts. It elicits the best things that could happen if the youth makes the change, and the worst things that could happen if the youth does *not* make the change (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). For example, a set of questions evoking a youth’s motivation to engage in prosocial activities might sound like:

- *“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?”*

These questions invite the young person to think about structuring their time, which has been shown to strengthen recovery. Asking young people to verbalize the downside to staying the same reminds them of potential consequences that they might want to avoid. When young people engage in prosocial activities that are meaningful to them with others who support their goals and values, they are building a lifestyle incompatible with substance use. This builds recovery capital and increases the likelihood of continuing gains made in treatment (Hennessy et al., 2019).

An example about graduating from high school might be *“What are the best things that could happen if you completed high school?”* and *“What are the worst things that could happen if you didn’t complete high school?”* To explore substance use, a practitioner could ask *“What might be the worst things that could happen if you continued drinking?”* and *“What might be the best things that could happen if you stopped?”*

Asking evocative questions about DARNCATs prompts the team member to explore open questions about the different categories of change talk (Naar & Suarez, 2021). Examples include:

- *“What do you hope to get out of the drug treatment 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)



The practitioner is encouraged to match the youth's stage of change while evoking change talk. Asking about commitment before the youth has decided to make the change is likely to elicit sustain talk, which indicates that the team member is ahead of the youth. Get back on the same page by asking about desire, ability, reason, or need for change as opposed to how the youth is going to make the change. For youth who are ready to move on, questions about CATs can aid the planning task.

Looking back invites the youth to recall and compare the times before the problem occurred with the current situation (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Examples include:

- *"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."*

This strategy highlights the discrepancy between two periods of time in an effort to elicit change talk.

Looking forward invites the youth to imagine what the future benefits of making the change might be before carrying it out (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). It might sound like:

- *"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?"*

Adolescents' sense of time is different from that of adults. Thinking ahead one year into the future might be challenging for an adolescent, whereas looking three months into the future might be more manageable.

Exploring goals and values connects the youth's deeply held goals and values to the behavior change. It elicits what is most important in the youth's life, which may be a source of discrepancy between the youth's current situation and their desired future life (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Examples include:

- *"How might completing the drug treatment 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?"*

Miller and Rollnick observe that "discrepancy between current behavior and a core value can be a powerful motivator for change when explored in a safe and supportive atmosphere" (2013, p. 89). For youth in particular, having tangible materials to use when exploring goals and values provides structure and a place to start the conversation (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Naar & Suarez, 2021). The list on the Affirmations cue card offers a menu from which youth developing a sense of self may learn about their unique qualities and values of importance to them. Additionally, practitioners working with youth may use the same materials as inspiration to deliver genuine, meaningful, and specific affirmations during change conversations (Wyatt & Kottnerus, 2025).

**TABLE 8. Descriptions and examples of strategies to cultivate change talk**

Name of Strategy	Description	Example
Change rulers	This strategy consists of two parts designed to elicit the perceived importance of change: The first part asks the youth to rate how important the change is to them on a scale of 0 to 10, and the second part elicits the reasons that the youth chose the particular number in comparison to a lower number. Implicit in the use of the ruler is inviting the youth to articulate change talk. For examples of a change ruler, see the corresponding Strategies for Cultivating Change Talk Cue Card.	1. "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 elicits change talk: 2. "What makes you a 6 and not a 2?" <i>TIP:</i> 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	This strategy consists of two parts: The first elicits the <i>best things</i> that could happen if the youth makes the change, and the second invokes the <i>worst things</i> that could happen if the youth does <i>not</i> make the change.	1. "What might be the <i>best things</i> that could happen if you found something structured to do after school?" 2. "What might be the <i>worst things</i> that could happen if you continued to have nothing to do after school?" 1. "What might be the <i>best things</i> that could happen if you stopped drinking?" 2. "What might be the <i>worst things</i> that could happen if you continued drinking?"
Asking evocative questions about DARNCATs	In this strategy, the practitioner asks open questions about the different categories of change talk.	• "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)



Name of Strategy	Description	Example
Looking back	This strategy invites the youth to recall and compare the times before the problem occurred with the current situation. It highlights the discrepancy between two periods of time in an effort to elicit change talk.	• “Looking back, how were things different before you started smoking marijuana?” • “What kinds of things did your family used to do together?” • “What was school like for you when you were younger?” • “Tell me about your childhood best friend.”
Looking forward	This strategy invites the youth to imagine what the future benefits of making the change might be before carrying it out. Adolescents’ sense of time is different from that of adults. Thinking ahead one year into the future might be challenging for an adolescent, whereas looking three months into the future might be more manageable.	• “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	This strategy connects the youth’s deeply held goals and values to the behavior change. It elicits what is most important in the youth’s life, which may be a source of discrepancy between the youth’s current situation and desired future life.	• “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?”

Getting the Most Out of Your Open Questions: “What Else?”

“What else?” is not a standalone strategy; rather, it can be used after each of the strategies to elicit deeper change talk. When the team member asks a question using one of the strategies to cultivate change talk, the youth will respond with the first answer that comes to mind. Continue evoking change talk by asking “What else?” This practice deepens the conversation and evokes stronger motivation for change through exploration, reflection, and affirmation. For example, if a youth is asked “*What are your reasons for quitting smoking?*” they may respond that they know it is bad for their health and they probably should quit. The question “What else?” prompts them to delve deeper. The youth might describe how smoking costs a lot of money and how that money could be used for something important in life. If asked “What else?” again, the youth might talk about someone they know who got lung cancer, and say they’re worried that might happen to them if they don’t quit, or they might talk about how they felt scared when they woke up with chest pains after a night of drinking and heavy smoking.

“What else?” is a simple question that expands and deepens change talk and strengthens internal motivation, the very intention of MI. Further exploration in this manner evokes richness and depth of thought. Key to this strategy is to reflect and affirm each piece of change talk before repeating the question, and knowing when to move on.



Strategy for Sharing Information: Ask – Offer – Ask

Ask – Offer – Ask (AOA) is a method for sharing information that is congruent with MI practice (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). This method guides practitioners to honor the person's existing knowledge, prioritize the person's interest, offer information as a menu of options, and elicit thoughts and reactions as the person considers how the ideas might apply to their situation.

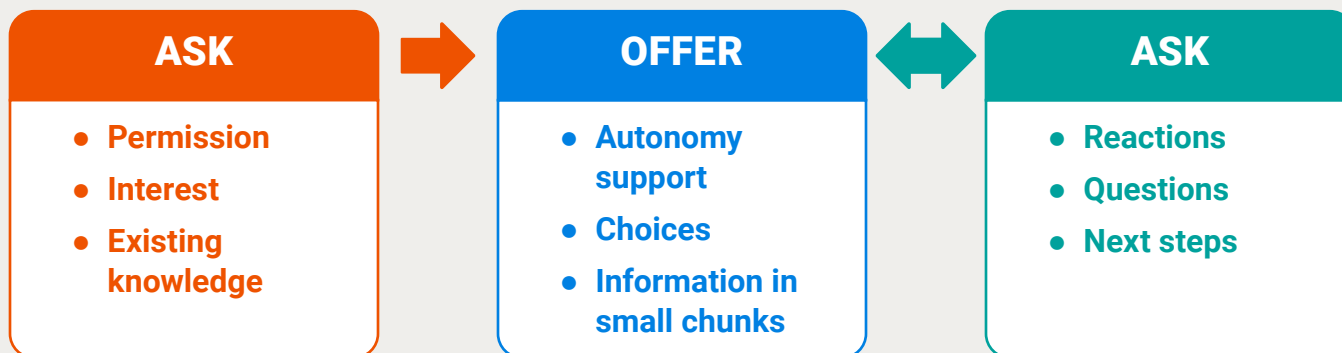
Miller and Rollnick (2023) explain that “information can be offered in a neutral way, but it becomes advice when it implies a suggestion for change” (p. 191). The way information is delivered plays a critical role in how adolescents interpret and respond to messages within therapeutic court proceedings.

Ask – Offer – Ask: Structure and Process

The practitioner draws from each component shown in Figure 3, starting with asking what the youth already knows about the topic and what interests them about it, and then asking permission to share information before proceeding. Next, the team member affirms the youth's existing knowledge, provides a brief menu of options, and offers information within the specific area of interest. Throughout this process, the MI practitioner naturally acknowledges the youth's autonomy in deciding what to do. After information is shared, the practitioner asks what the youth makes of the information, what questions they have, and what next steps might be.

Note that offering information is sandwiched between asking. This model is flexible, with the practitioner able to bounce back and forth between the three components based on the needs of the conversation and prioritizing what is most important to the youth.

FIGURE 3. Ask – Offer – Ask model



A central feature of AOA is the creation of a **menu of options** from which the person can choose the one they'd like to hear more about and decide what might work best for them. The list may start with ideas from the young person, or it might be offered by the practitioner, particularly if the youth has requested guidance or information. Miller and Rollnick (2023) write, “Freedom is about choices. People usually respond better when they can freely choose among options than when they are being told what to do” (p. 194). AOA emphasizes the importance of supporting autonomy, as young people are more likely to consider new information when they are empowered to make their own choices.



What Ask – Offer – Ask Might Sound Like

Examples of questions and statements that the JDTC team members may use when facilitating an AOA conversation follow. Treat these examples like a menu, where one item is selected from each category based on its relevance and function in the conversation. For example, it may not be necessary to ask for permission if it feels as though it is already there.

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. Use the model of AOA to guide the youth through decision making as they consider their choices.

ASK:

- Permission: “Would it be OK if I share some information with you about binge drinking?”
- Interest: “What would you like to know about depression?”
- Existing knowledge: “What do you already know about how marijuana affects memory?”

OFFER:

- Autonomy support: “The decision is yours” or “The choice is up to you.”
- Choices: “Some things people have found helpful are...” and “There are a few options...”
- Information in small chunks: Start sentences with phrases like “What we know is...” or “This program...” or “Generally...”

ASK:

- Reactions: Reflect “This surprises you” or “You’re not sure about this,” or ask “What do you make of that?”
- Questions: “What questions do you have?” or “What else would you like to know?”
- Next steps: “What might help you decide?” or “What might be the next step?”

In a therapeutic court proceeding, the judge has the unique opportunity to hear directly from the youth. AOA provides the judge with a way to partner with the youth to engage, build rapport, share information about the program, and focus on goals relating to behavior change.

The next section contains two sample dialogues illustrating AOA in action. The first is an interaction between the judge and a youth, and the second features an interaction between the JPC and a youth. The column on the right side labels the specific MI skill and strategy in use.

DIALOGUE 1. Ask – Offer – Ask: Maria and the judge

Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated (AOA in Bold)
Judge	Hi Maria. I’m the JDTC Judge. I wanted to welcome you and check in regarding what you may already know about the JDTC program.	Asking for existing knowledge
Maria	Well, I have heard some things about how hard it is.	
Judge	You’re wondering what it might be like for you.	Complex reflection
Maria	Well, I heard that I must be at court every week, and if I miss I could get sent to detention.	



Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated (AOA in Bold)
Judge	You are quite right that you'd be coming into court at times. How often depends on where you are in the program. Right now, your main concern is detention.	Offering information Simple reflection
Maria	I wouldn't want to get sent to detention if I make a mistake. I don't want to be locked up.	
Judge	Part of the program is orienting new participants so they know what to expect. We want every person to succeed and know that people who opt in to the program need support and resources. Detention is usually our last resort. What we ask of you is to be accountable for yourself and tell us when you need help.	Offering information
Maria	OK. I can understand that. (pauses to think) I could definitely use help getting to court.	
Judge	You're thinking this through. Tell me more about what help you need getting to court.	Simple affirmation Open question
Maria	Well, my mom works, and I have a hard time getting places without her, especially when I have to watch my little brother.	
Judge	You're balancing your family responsibilities with your own needs.	Complex affirmation
Maria	Yes, your Honor. I'm used to taking the bus, but you can't always count on it. Sometimes I end up being late when I don't want to be. It's harder when I have to take my little brother with me.	
Judge	Being on time is important to you. If you are interested, there are a few other options in addition to the bus that have worked for others.	Complex affirmation Asking permission
Maria	Sure.	
Judge	The treatment provider you are working with has a van that can drive people to court and treatment. We do have childcare at court who could watch your brother while you're here. Another option is taking a taxi or ride share. Which ones interest you?	Offering choices Asking for reactions
Maria	(pauses to think) Well, the van could work if I could take my brother with me. And childcare at court would be very helpful.	
Judge	Ensuring that your brother is taken care of is a big part of this.	Simple affirmation
Maria	Yes. That and finding a reliable way to get me to court.	
Judge	You have a few options to look into.	Simple reflection
Maria	Yes, your Honor. (pauses to think) Maybe my neighbor can watch my brother on the days I have to go to court. I need some time to think about this and talk to my mom.	
Judge	That makes sense to me. You and your mom can talk with your probation counselor or case manager here if you have more questions.	Offering choices



Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated (AOA in Bold)
Maria	Thank you, your Honor. My mom might like that.	
Judge	Maria, it was nice meeting you today. We talked a little bit about the program and options for transportation. Staff are here to answer questions you or your mom might have and we can share more about the support and resources that go along with the program. Whether or not to opt in is your decision. What might help you decide?	Reflective summary + Offering autonomy support + Key question
Maria	I guess talking to my mom and the probation counselor would be a start. I need to know more about the program rules.	
Judge	We can get you a participant manual that describes the program in more detail. Thank you for coming into court today. I look forward to hearing what you decide.	Offering information Closing
Maria	Thank you, your Honor. I'll let you know.	

In Dialogue 1, note how the judge combined ROARS with AOA to talk with a potential participant about the JDTC program. The judge prioritized what was important to Maria, addressing topics including transportation, caring for her brother, worries about detention, and including her mother in the decision. The judge used both levels of affirmations and wrapped up the conversation with a reflective summary plus a key question.

In Dialogue 2, notice the function of reflections and affirmations within AOA. The JPC affirms Zeek and uses reflections to invite him to clarify and continue talking. It is important that affirmations are specific and genuine; in early conversations there may be more simple affirmations than complex ones. As the practitioner builds rapport, they can listen for enduring characteristics, strengths, skills, and values along the way.

DIALOGUE 2. Ask – Offer – Ask: Zeek and the juvenile probation counselor

Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated (AOA in Bold)
JPC	Hi Zeek. I'm your assigned Juvenile Probation Counselor for JDTC. I know that you received a lot of information since your recent opt-in and heard you had some questions about the random urine drug screen schedule.	Asking for interest
Zeek	Well, I know that someone may show up at my door randomly and ask for one, and sometimes it happens when I come to court or have meetings with you.	
JPC	You've got that right. We have a system that randomly picks participants after the first drug screen. You were picked today.	Offering information
Zeek	Oh, I didn't think I would get one so soon. Um...so what happens if you find something?	
JPC	You're concerned it might be positive.	Complex reflection
Zeek	Yeah, because I know marijuana stays in your system for a long time.	



Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated (AOA in Bold)
JPC	Let's see what the results say and take it from there. Generally, as participants start working with the team here, they begin to learn what leads them to smoking marijuana. What are some reasons you smoked?	Offering information Engaging: Asking for elaboration
Zeek	Well, it helped me chill when I was stressed and made it easier to fall asleep sometimes.	
JPC	You were looking for a way to feel better and marijuana helped at the time.	Simple reflection
Zeek	Yes. And all this court stuff stresses me out so I will have some marijuana in my system.	
JPC	Being up front about this goes a long way here.	Simple affirmation
Zeek	It's not easy. I'm not sure how this will all work out.	
JPC	You feel two ways about it; marijuana has helped you with some things, and now it could be getting in the way of having the charges dropped.	Double-sided reflection
Zeek	Yeah, even though this program was my idea I still kind of dread it.	
JPC	Part of you feels unsure about whether this will work out for you and another part had reasons to opt in.	Double-sided reflection
Zeek	Yes. I know this is what I <i>should</i> do but I have used weed for a couple of years. I'm not sure how I'd be without it.	
JPC	You've got a lot on your mind. While you're in this program, we'll work together to sort these things out. What made you decide to opt into the program?	Simple reflection Offering information Change talk strategy: Asking about DARNCATs
Zeek	Well, if I make it through JDTC, my charges would get dropped. That would be one thing I wouldn't have to worry about anymore.	
JPC	That would be a relief for you.	Reflection of feeling
Zeek	Yes. (thinking) And my mom worries about me. I don't want her to worry; she's got enough going on in her life.	
JPC	You and your mom both deal with a lot of stress.	Simple reflection
Zeek	(nods) And I kinda feel bad about it but weed is the only thing that helps me relax.	
JPC	You care about your mom a lot.	Simple affirmation
Zeek	Yeah, I mean, she gets on my case most of the time, but she also does stuff for me.	



Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated (AOA in Bold)
JPC	Your mom wants the best for you.	Sustain talk strategy: Reframing.
Zeek	She does. I'm lucky to have her even though we argue sometimes.	
JPC	Zeek, we are coming to the end of our meeting and need to move on to the drug screen. If it's OK with you, I'd like to continue talking at our next meeting.	Structure Asking permission
Zeek	Ugh, OK. What's going to happen if it's positive?	
JPC	Let's review the results at our next meeting. Generally, the court likes to see participants talking in group, keeping appointments, and doing fun and productive things like after-school activities and getting good grades. You've taken a few steps forward in being honest about the possible positive result and identifying stress as one reason you've used marijuana. You really want the possession charges dismissed and are opted in to this program to accomplish that. What might be your next step?	Offering information Reflective summary + Key question
Zeek	Well, as we were talking, I was thinking that running used to be something that helped me. I always felt better after a run. Maybe I'll try that.	
JPC	Running worked for you before and you may want to try it again.	Simple affirmation
Zeek	Maybe. (pauses) Not sure where my running shoes are.	

In Dialogue 2, the JPC incorporated open questions from the engaging task to understand Zeek's reasons for using marijuana while addressing their question about the results of a positive random drug screen through AOA. During the conversation, the JPC also used a strategy to cultivate change talk in asking about the reasons Zeek initially opted in to the JDTC program. Most importantly, the JPC reflected and affirmed change talk they heard to move the conversation forward without pushing too hard for change.

Overall, the JDTC team regularly provides information to youth, caregivers, and others connected to the program. AOA is an engaging and respectful method that honors a youth's existing knowledge, prioritizes information the youth is most interested in, and shares information in a manner consistent with the relational and technical components of MI practices. The sample dialogues demonstrated how to incorporate ROARS along with strategies for cultivating change talk.

ACTION TIPS FOR ASK – OFFER – ASK

- Bring the AOA cue card with you to court or to a session with a youth as a reminder of the structure.
- Ask permission before offering information unless the adolescent asks a direct question.
- Before giving information, ask what the youth already knows or would like to know.
- Provide a menu of options, elicit what the youth makes of it, and support their autonomy in making decisions.
- Remember to elicit reactions, questions, and next steps after offering information.



Strategies for Responding to Sustain Talk and Dodging Discord: Rethinking Resistance

In the third edition of *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*, Miller and Rollnick discontinued the use of the term “resistance” to describe “any apparent client movement away from change” (2013, p. 196). Labeling a youth as resistant places responsibility for not changing solely on the youth, blames the youth for “being difficult,” and pathologizes the youth 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).

As noted earlier, sustain talk consists of youth statements expressing reasons to stay the same. Remember that DARNCATs is the acronym for types of change talk. These same categories exist for sustain talk. For example, a youth may express no desire for change when saying, “*I really like smoking.*” The youth might not feel an urgency to make the change when saying, “*I don’t need to quit smoking.*” And the youth may take specific action away from change when saying, “*I went to counseling a few times, but I don’t need to go back.*” Table 9 presents the types, definitions, and examples of sustain talk.

TABLE 9. Types, definitions, and examples of sustain talk

TYPE	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Desire	No desire for change	“I really like smoking.”
Ability	Inability to change	“I’ve tried to quit before, and it’s impossible.”
Reason	Reasons for staying the same	“Smoking helps me relax.”
Need	No urgency for change	“I don’t need to quit drinking.”
Commitment	Commitment to status quo	“I’m <i>not</i> giving up smoking.”
Activation	Leaning away from the direction of change	“I’m not sure I need to do all this stuff.”
Taking steps	Specific actions away from change	“I went to counseling a few times, but I don’t need to go back.”

Discord refers to a disturbance in the relationship where people are no longer “dancing to the same tune” or “singing the same song.” It may take the form of interrupting, arguing, or disagreeing within the conversation. When discord arises, it is a signal to the team member that a shift in approach is needed (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Discord may occur in response to the practitioner telling the youth how to change rather than evoking ideas, or as an indicator that the youth is feeling overwhelmed, disengaged, hopeless, or misunderstood. Strategies to **dodge discord** include revisiting engagement; connecting the youth’s goals and values to behavior change; affirming the youth’s strengths, abilities, values, efforts, and skills; and remembering to elicit responses from the youth.

Guidelines for Softening Sustain Talk

The MI practitioner has several options when deciding how to strategically respond to sustain talk. First, the JDTC team member will need to decide whether to reflect the sustain talk. There is a risk in lingering too long in sustain talk. While reflecting sustain talk might express empathy for the person’s



perspective, it is unlikely to motivate the youth toward change. Additionally, it may reinforce the youth in continuing to focus on the reasons to stay the same. Developing discrepancy between the youth's current behavior and the youth's goals and values is meant to evoke an internal tension that the youth feels motivated to resolve.

An MI practitioner who decides to reflect sustain talk should do so simply and briefly. Reserve the complex reflections for change talk. Listen for opportunities to reflect change talk that might be intertwined with sustain talk. Both will be present, especially in a person expressing ambivalence about change.

Other options include using time qualifiers in response to sustain talk to leave the door open for the possibility of change. Words and phrases added to reflections such as “*right now*,” “*yet*,” and “*sometimes*” convey accurate empathy while at the same time adding language that conveys a temporary status to allow for change.

Strategies for Softening Sustain Talk

MI practitioners selectively attend to change talk, as opposed to equally reflecting both change talk and sustain talk. This is not to say that sustain talk is ignored; rather, as has been suggested elsewhere in this TAB, practitioners are encouraged to be strategic in how they respond to it. Strategies for softening sustain talk described in this section include **simple** and **double-sided reflections**, **amplified reflections**, **emphasizing autonomy**, **reframing**, **shifting attention**, **apologizing**, **coming alongside**, and **using a pendulum approach** (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).

Simple and **double-sided reflections** were previously described. **Amplified reflections** emphasize the absolute portion of a youth's statement, inviting them to step away from the sustain talk. This might sound like “*There's NO reason to change your marijuana use*” and “*You're ONLY here because your mom made you.*” Naar and Suarez (2021) note the importance of delivery: “If your tone is straightforward and honest, then these amplified statements will often elicit *Yeah, but* statements followed by reasons to change” (p. 63). This type of reflection should be used sparingly and within the nonjudgmental atmosphere of acceptance. It is meant to evoke a response and is effective when delivered properly.

Emphasizing autonomy is a simple yet powerful strategy, especially if the team member is hearing more sustain talk than change talk. Imagine the practitioner and the youth are holding a piece of rope as one would in a game of tug of war. When the youth begins to pull away and slips into sustain talk, the team member has two choices: pull harder attempting to drag the youth into change talk or drop the rope. Emphasizing personal choice has the effect of dropping the rope and acknowledging the truth: changing is the youth's decision, despite any external pressure; it is ultimately up to the youth to decide if and how to change (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Emphasizing autonomy might sound like, “You have a lot to think about; the choice is yours” or “You have some options to consider” or “What might help you decide?” This strategy specifically names the young person's freedom to choose, avoiding an unintended tug of war and mobilizing empowerment from the spirit of MI.

Reframing invites the youth to consider another perspective by looking at their situation from a different point of view. **Shifting attention** recognizes that current motivation to change a behavior may not be strong enough to tip the balance toward change. This strategy invites the practitioner to guide the conversation toward another behavior in an effort to promote a more productive conversation and to harness energy for what the youth is willing to change now. The topic being dropped can be revisited at a later time. The change ruler, described earlier in this TAB, can be used to assess how important the youth currently feels it is to change the behavior. Generally, scores of 5 and above represent the tipping



point toward change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). If a score is below 5, the youth is less likely to go through the effort of changing the specific goal behavior.

If the practitioner feels that discord is present, **apologizing** offers a simple acknowledgment of misunderstanding or miscommunication for the practitioner's part in the discord. Apologizing is a way to shift the conversation back to being on the same page and refocusing on the youth's goals and values around change. In **coming alongside**, the practitioner sides with sustain talk; that is, the team member reflects the youth's reasons for *not* changing. This strategy invites the youth to take up the opposite side of the argument: the side for change.

Examples of Softening Sustain Talk

The strategies to soften sustain talk provide options for JDTC team members to respond strategically to youth. Table 10 provides examples of how the strategies might sound in response to the 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."*

TABLE 10. Examples of strategies for softening sustain talk

Strategy	Example
<i>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 <i>ONLY</i> 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</i>	In this strategy, the practitioner reflects a bit of sustain talk while looking for opportunities to swing the pendulum into change talk. Use sparingly, and do so when strategies to cultivate change talk aren't gaining traction yet. See Dialogue 3 for an example.

In the last strategy, the **pendulum approach**, the practitioner reflects a bit of sustain talk while looking for opportunities to swing into change talk. This approach is helpful when the person is "unwilling to talk about one side of ambivalence until they have given sufficient voice to the other" (Miller & Rollnick, 2023, p. 237). Remember to reflect sustain talk briefly and simply; save the complex reflections for change talk and when engaging to understand the youth's perspective. The practitioner's goal is to convey accurate empathy while searching for a path toward change talk. Similar to amplified reflections, this approach should be used sparingly and with the purpose of swinging the pendulum into change talk. See Dialogue 3 for an example.

**DIALOGUE 3. Demonstrating the pendulum approach: Liz and the case manager**

Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated
Liz	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.	
Case manager	You're trying to stay out of trouble.	Complex reflection for engaging
Liz	Yes. And everyone is yelling at me about something. My parents are angry about my grades. My teachers aren't helping. No one understands.	
Case manager	Things are harder for you than people realize.	Complex reflection for engaging
Liz	I get distracted, especially when I have to write an essay. Smoking weed helps me focus. It's the <i>only</i> thing that works.	
Case manager	You feel it's easier for you to get your homework done when you smoke weed.	Reflecting sustain talk
Liz	Yes. It relaxes me and I can just write.	
Case manager	You can get <i>all</i> of your work done.	Amplified reflection
Liz	I mean, I get something turned in.	
Case manager	It's better than nothing.	Reflecting sustain talk
Liz	Kind of. Sometimes the grades are low, but no one can say I didn't try.	
Case manager	You're in a tough spot. On one hand, smoking weed helps you get something turned in, and on the other, the grades aren't what you want.	Double-sided reflection
Liz	Yes. I don't know what else to do. I know the program expects me to stop smoking, but that's the one thing that helps me.	
Case manager	What are some reasons you decided to opt in?	Open question seeking change talk
Liz	I can't have a charge on my record.	
Case manager	You've got big plans.	Complex reflection

In this section, a variety of strategies for softening sustain talk were described and demonstrated. Remember that ambivalence is a natural part of the change process and practitioners can expect to hear a mixture of both sustain talk and change talk in conversations about change. Softening sustain talk is a nuanced skill that takes time to build and become comfortable with. Increasing familiarity with strategies and how they might sound in a conversation is a start.

Action Tips for Softening Sustain Talk

- If the youth seems to be pulling away or pushing back, simply and powerfully honor their autonomy aloud with statements such as *"Ultimately the choice is yours"* and *"The decision is up to you."*
- Use a double-sided reflection, starting with sustain talk and ending with change talk. For example, *"On one hand, smoking marijuana is fun, and on the other it's starting to cause some problems."* People tend to talk about the last thing they heard.



- Voice the youth's dilemma by using a double-sided reflection: *"You're in a tough spot; part of you isn't ready to stop smoking weed and another part is tired of being nagged all the time."*
- Add time qualifiers such as *"right now"* and *"yet"* to soften sustain talk and convey temporary status. An example is *"You're not sure about this right now"* or *"No one understands you yet."*

Strategy: Reflecting Your Way Through "I Don't Know"

Imagine this: You are fresh from an MI training and can't wait to try out reflections during your first session of the day. You deliver a beautiful complex reflection, and the youth responds with *"I don't know."* You feel a bit stunned that the youth didn't continue talking in response to your well-formed empathic complex reflection. You're feeling pressured to get the conversation moving, and you begin asking a series of questions in an attempt to engage the youth. Unfortunately, the reaction is the opposite. The questions elicit short, one-word answers. The youth does not offer change talk. You are at a loss for how to dig yourself out of the question-and-answer trap.

The above scenario is a frustrating experience, especially as team members are eager to practice their MI skills with adolescents in their JDTC program. When a youth says, *"I don't know,"* it can feel like a stop sign or a roadblock for which there is no detour. Adolescents may say *"I don't know"* for different reasons: they might need time to think and feel pressured to give an immediate answer, they might feel afraid of the consequences if they say what they're thinking, or it could be that they sincerely don't know how to respond.

While the youth may not be offering verbal information from which the JDTC team member may generate reflections, they are likely providing nonverbal clues as to their thoughts or feelings. When the team member is faced with a young person who says *"I don't know,"* that is an opportunity to test the power of accurate empathy as expressed through reflections.

If the youth says *"I don't know"* in a tone of voice that indicates they may be feeling *unsure*, the JDTC team member could respond with *"You're not sure if change is possible."* The youth didn't say those words, and yet the tone of voice is a clue to how the youth is feeling. The team member says aloud what the youth may be communicating, inviting the youth to confirm, clarify, or elaborate. Staying within the rhythm of reflective listening keeps the team member out of the question-and-answer trap.

If the youth says *"I don't know"* in a posture that indicates a feeling of *distrustfulness*, the JDTC team member can say *"You're not sure who you can trust right now"* or *"You're worried I might tell your mom everything you say."* These are common concerns of adolescents. The reflections acknowledge these common worries and invite conversations the youth may not have known how to initiate about how their treatment information is shared, for example. The youth may not engage fully in treatment if the concerns are missed.

If the youth says *"I don't know"* with body language that is communicating *anger*, the JDTC team member can reflect, *"Something has gotten under your skin,"* or *"No one understands you yet,"* or *"You're angry about something."* Think about how the youth might respond to these reflections. They might talk about an event that elicited anger or talk about feeling misunderstood by the JDTC team. *The most important impacts of reflecting through "I don't know" are expressing accurate empathy, finding a detour around the communication roadblock, and engaging the youth in the conversation.*

A youth who has experienced trauma, anxiety, or depression may communicate shame or hopelessness by saying *"I don't know."* In these situations, reflections might include *"This is hard to talk about"* or *"Right now, it's hard to see how things could change."* These reflections validate a youth who



may be feeling vulnerable, and accurate empathy has the potential to deepen the working alliance in these circumstances. Notice the use of time qualifiers in the above examples.

JDTC team members who build skills in complex reflections are equipped to manage challenging conversations in a manner that promotes engagement and honors the working alliance. They actively avoid falling into the question-and-answer trap and rely on reflective listening to move the conversation forward into productive territory.

Strategy: Dealing With a Slip or Setback

In treatment courts, practitioners use terms like “slip,” “setback,” “return to use,” and “relapse” to describe instances when a client resumes substance use. These terms vary in severity, with a “slip” typically referring to brief or isolated use that may require minimal intervention, while a “relapse” often signals a deeper issue needing more intensive support. Treatment providers play a key role in advising the court on appropriate therapeutic responses. Treating setbacks as learning experiences illuminates gaps in the change plan where there are opportunities to strengthen adolescent recovery capital. Regardless of the terminology, the court’s responsibility remains the same: to address the behavior and guide the young person back on the path to recovery.

From the perspective of treatment providers, the terms “relapse” and “lapse” are ones that MI practitioners avoid, choosing instead to use “slip” and “setback” (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; Naar & Suarez, 2021). When people are making a complex change, such as stopping the use of substances, and all of the behavioral, emotional, and social adjustments that come along with it, setbacks are not unusual. Naar and Suarez (2021) write:

Instead, the goal of the maintaining phase is to express empathy about the difficulties of maintaining changes in the context of temporary setbacks or slips, elicit the client’s perspective on temporary slips, evoke change talk specific to maintaining change, and support autonomy and choice in making plans to address the triggers. (p. 129)

Miller & Rollnick (2023) suggest addressing setbacks early to “keep them from derailing the person’s plan” (p. 205). They explain that significant changes can bring unforeseen situations and previously unidentified needs that the change plan did not anticipate. The best outcome from a slip or a setback is the youth learning from it and strengthening motivation to continue working toward change.

Dialogue 4 features a conversation between a 17-year-old young man named Chris and his treatment counselor. Chris has been in the JDTC program for six months. He had been attending the majority of his intensive outpatient groups and was testing negative for substances up until now. In this scenario, he is meeting with his treatment counselor for his weekly individual session and to talk about his recent positive urine drug screen.

The conversation begins with **collaborative agenda setting**, described earlier in the section on the focusing task. While reading the dialogue, notice the flow of the conversation, the attention to change talk, and how the counselor guides the youth forward in recovery according to his goals and values while eliciting intrinsic motivation for change. Also notice how reflections and affirmations are greater in number than open questions.

**DIALOGUE 4. Dealing with a slip: Chris and the treatment provider**

Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated
Counselor	Good to see you again, Chris.	Opening
Chris	Yeah, you too.	
Counselor	Today, for our weekly individual session, I wanted to check in to see how things are going for you. You've been in the program for six months now. You've had good attendance at group. Your drug screens have been mostly negative except for the last one. I'd like to hear what you make of your progress so far and for us to talk about your upcoming court hearing. What's on your agenda for us today?	Collaborative agenda setting Simple affirmations Open question
Chris	Man, I'm stressing about that drug screen. That's all the judge is gonna see. She's not gonna see all the good stuff I've been doing.	
Counselor	You're really worried about this.	Reflection of feeling
Chris	Yeah, I was doing fine for so long, and then I slipped.	
Counselor	It kind of snuck up on you.	Metaphor reflection
Chris	Yeah, I was heading home from school and ran into some old friends. They asked me to go to the park, and we smoked a little. I hadn't seen them in a while, and I wanted to hang out. I thought I could be with them and not smoke.	
Counselor	It was a tough situation for you: On one hand, you miss your old friends, and on the other, you've been working hard to change your substance use.	Double-sided reflection
Chris	Exactly. None of this has been easy. The judge expects so much, and I've made all these changes. I don't get to hang out with my old friends, and I can't even smoke a little weed once in a while. I want to get that charge off my record, but it's really hard to follow all these rules.	
Counselor	You've been working so hard for the past six months: understanding your substance use, learning new coping skills, and recently, trying out a new lifestyle without substances. You've changed a lot of things in your life. What do you make of that?	Simple affirmations + Reflective summary + Key question
Chris	I've really changed a lot. I need that charge off my record. That's why I'm doing all this. My uncle has a felony and he has had lots of problems getting a good job and a good place to live. I don't want that for my life. I am good at computers; you can make a lot of money in computers.	
Counselor	You've got some goals for yourself. Tell me about your computer skills.	Simple affirmation Open question
Chris	It was the one class in school I liked. The teacher was cool and taught us a lot.	
Counselor	You could see yourself continuing to learn about computers after you finish your high school completion program.	Complex reflection



Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated
Chris	Maybe. If I can find a program that's quick and doesn't cost a lot. My teacher told us about scholarships, too.	
Counselor	You're clear about what you want.	Simple affirmation
Chris	Yeah, I had a lot of time to think about things when I was locked up. That was not fun.	
Counselor	You don't want to go back there, especially when you have the potential for something more.	Complex reflection
Chris	Yes. If I can just get through this program, my record will be clear, and I'll be free to spend my time doing what I want.	
Counselor	You've got some good reasons for opting in to this program. Along those lines, you have a check-in with your JPC tomorrow and he will likely ask you to take a drug test.	Simple reflection Structure
Chris	Ugh. I know.	
Counselor	You're worried about it.	Reflection of feeling
Chris	Yes. I don't know what to do. If I tested positive here, I'll test positive with my JPC tomorrow. I don't want to be in trouble with the judge. Can you help me?	
Counselor	We can talk about your options for handling this. If the judge sees that you're dealing with it in treatment, she might be more understanding.	Asking for interest
Chris	Do you think that will work?	
Counselor	While we don't know exactly what the judge will do, you could highlight your treatment attendance, share what you learned from this slip, and say how you'll prevent it from happening again.	Offering choices
Chris	The judge has seemed to like all the progress I've been making. This situation really surprised me; I didn't realize how hard it would be to hang with my friends and not smoke with them.	
Counselor	You weren't expecting that.	Simple reflection
Chris	No. I wanted to have some fun and hang out. I'm always doing something serious, like going to court, seeing my JPC, working on classes, or coming to group. I wanted to chill for a bit.	
Counselor	You've been meeting all of your responsibilities and wanted a break.	Simple affirmation
Chris	Yeah, and it could all be lost because of one mistake. I'm really wishing I hadn't smoked.	
Counselor	Looking back, you're regretting that decision. You've made many changes in the last six months that have been difficult and you want the judge to see that.	Reflection of feeling Simple affirmation
Chris	Yes, and I'm worried about getting in trouble for one mistake.	



Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated
Counselor	You've invested a lot of time and don't want this to get in the way of your plans for the future. What do you make of what happened?	Simple affirmation Open question
Chris	I don't really have anything fun to do. I'm so busy going to court, school, or treatment that I don't get to hang out with friends or do many fun things.	
Counselor	You're making an important connection here, Chris. In group, we talk about building recovery capital. Finding activities you enjoy and making friends who have similar interests and goals are part of how people keep the types of changes you've been making.	Simple affirmation Offering information
Chris	I hadn't thought of that before. Maybe if I had something to look forward to, and friends to hang out with who wouldn't mess me up with the judge, this could be easier.	
Counselor	Your day wouldn't feel like it was only things you <i>had</i> to do.	Complex reflection
Chris	Yeah.	
Counselor	You mentioned liking computers previously. What other things do you like to do?	Collecting reflective summary Open question
Chris	I used to play basketball at the park a lot, but everybody smokes there.	
Counselor	That could be risky.	Complex reflection
Chris	Definitely. It's hard to make friends with people who don't smoke.	
Counselor	This could take a bit to figure out. Let's keep talking about it.	Structure
Chris	OK.	
Counselor	Today we talked about how "all work and no play" may have led up to a slip. We found a gap in your recovery plan that could use some strengthening as we know that having something fun to do where you can meet other people who have similar interests and goals builds recovery capital. Your awareness of high-risk situations, like the one you just experienced, is growing. What might be your next step?	Reflective summary + Simple affirmation + Key question
Chris	Well, I want to be prepared for my JPC meeting tomorrow and ultimately my court date. I know others have written a paragraph planning what they will say. Maybe I can start there.	
Counselor	Getting your thoughts written down would help you feel prepared. If you want, I can give you the list of programs we have connections to, and you can start thinking about which ones might interest you. There's a songwriting program and some exercise programs on that list, along with vocational programs focused on technology.	Simple affirmation + Asking for interest + Offering choices
Chris	OK. That would help me feel more prepared to answer the judge's questions in court. She's gonna ask what I have to say about the positive UDS. I can tell her what we talked about and that we're looking for something fun for me to do.	



Speaker	Dialogue	MI Skills Illustrated
Counselor	She might be impressed with your actions. And you might find something fun to do that could also help you with your future computer goals.	Simple affirmation
Chris	I hope so.	

The dialogue illustrates MI skills in action. It provides one model for understanding the flow of MI where skills and strategies capture the teachable moments involved in a slip while maintaining the orientation toward change talk, affirmations, and the spirit. The counselor developed discrepancy between Chris's slip in using substances, the requirements established by the court, and his intrinsic motivation to get a good job in the future, within an atmosphere of partnership, acceptance, compassion, and empowerment. Lastly, the counselor drew from the MI skill of AOA and connected the RCAM material taught in substance use disorder treatment groups to a real-life situation.

Summary of Strategies for Navigating Specific Situations in MI

Key points covered in this section include:

- The technical goals of MI are to cultivate change talk and soften sustain talk.
- Effective strategies invite the youth to imagine what change might look like without feeling inadvertently pressured into making the change.
- Asking "*What else?*" is a simple way to elicit deeper change talk before moving to another strategy. A key component is to reflect and affirm each piece of change talk heard before repeating the question.
- AOA provides a structure for sharing information and is particularly useful in JDTC settings.
- The more ownership the person making change has over the plan, the more likely the person is to follow through with it.
- Think strategically before reflecting sustain talk; if it makes sense to reflect sustain talk, do so simply and briefly.
- Words and phrases added to reflections of sustain talk 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.
- Listen for nonverbal cues to reflect your way through "*I don't know*" responses. Reflect the feeling you think the youth is expressing rather than asking a question.
- Treat slips or setbacks as learning experiences; persistent behavior change takes time.

The next section describes a variety of options to continue training and practice in MI as well as concluding remarks.



Closing Remarks

Furthering MI Skills

Rosengren (2018) describes three general progressive levels of learning MI: (a) understanding the core concepts, (b) developing beginning proficiency, and (c) achieving and maintaining expert proficiency. Knowledge, practice, and feedback to advance through these levels of skills may be gained through a variety of activities, including reading, participating in live and virtual training sessions, and receiving coaching based on observed individual skill practice. Below is a menu of free and paid options for getting started:

- Read books and articles of particular interest from the reference list.
- Order free copies of SAMHSA's *Enhancing Motivation for Change in Substance Use Disorder Treatment* (SAMHSA, 2019) for JDTC team members.
- Identify one skill per week to practice, evaluating what went well and what to improve.
- Select one action tip or cue card to practice with other members of the JDTC team and share how it went with each other.
- Browse the [Motivational Interviewing Resources section of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers \(MINT\) website](#) (MINT, 2021a), which lists free and paid multimedia materials.
 - Under the Miscellaneous heading there is a section titled Youth Files that contains adolescent-specific materials.
- Participate in virtual or in-person training events, located through an internet search or hosted by organizations and conferences.
 - Regional [Addiction Technology Transfer Centers](#) (ATTC) funded by SAMHSA may offer free or low-cost MI training as well (ATTC Network, 2025).
- Work with a trainer who provides coaching and feedback to build proficiency in the delivery of MI services.
 - The MINT website lists trainers who have submitted an application, met a level of proficiency in MI by demonstrating their skills through a recorded work sample, and completed a MINT-sponsored Training of New Trainers (MINT, 2021b).

While training workshops are helpful for initial learning of MI spirit, skills, and strategies, they are not enough to maintain changes in facilitating MI-consistent conversations about change (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). Observed practice and coaching are vital parts of a successful path toward advancing and achieving proficiency in MI (Miller & Rollnick, 2023; SAMHSA, 2019). JDTC teams considering implementing MI are encouraged to work with a professional who can guide them in assembling a training plan for their team's specific needs. SAMHSA's *Enhancing Motivation for Change in Substance Use Disorder Treatment* (2019) offers elements to consider in generating a plan of learning activities.

Working with a trainer who understands the developmentally informed application of MI in the JDTC setting is essential. There are several places to begin searching for an individual trainer or training organization. The SAMHSA-funded ATTC Network offers regional training and technical assistance in the implementation of evidence-based addiction and recovery-oriented practices (ATTC Network, 2025). The MINT website hosts a searchable listing of trainers where individuals describe the type of training activities they offer in addition to specific areas of practical expertise (MINT, 2021b). Another option is to use an internet search engine to locate individual trainers and organizations.



Conclusion

Guiding young people with substance use disorders and juvenile legal involvement toward intrinsically motivated behavior change is challenging and impactful work. This TAB was created to help JDTC team members with varying levels of experience in MI learn and apply the research-based principles to their individual and collective work on JDTC.

Working from the spirit, skills, and strategies of MI, practitioners may develop their abilities to facilitate change conversations with youth. Outcomes are maximized when change conversations are further grounded in an understanding of youth development, adolescent recovery capital, the JDTC best practices, and other relevant resources. It is hoped that this TAB and the companion MI overview and cue cards will equip team members with practical ways to infuse the MI spirit, skills, and strategies into the JDTC programming they offer to guide youth toward happy, healthy, and productive lives.



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