

A Brief History of Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a way of talking with people about change related to things we often have mixed feelings about—exercise, diet, alcohol and other drug use, relationship issues, risky sexual behaviors, school- and job-related concerns, spiritual practices, certain attitudes, and other issues we face in our lives.

The MI approach grew out William R. Miller’s work with problem drinkers. In the past, it was believed that people who drank too much were unable to see how their use was harming themselves and others. They were said to be in denial. Counselors and others who wanted to help would try to break through this denial by using “in-your-face” tactics such as confrontation and shame to try to convince people of their need to change. As you can imagine, this approach didn’t work very well. None of us like it when other people think they know what’s best for us or try to *get* us to change. We want to decide for ourselves how to live our lives.

In 1991, William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick wrote a book titled *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People to Change Addictive Behavior*. It explained how to talk with people about their alcohol and drug use in ways that respected their ability to decide for themselves whether they wanted to change. In the book, the authors described the spirit (core attitudes and beliefs) of this approach and the specific skills and strategies of MI.

A second edition, *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People for Change*, was published in 2002. It further explained how MI works, the research behind it, and how to get better at using MI. It also described the spread of MI to other areas beyond substance use disorders, including health care, mental health, corrections, and school settings.

A third edition, *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*, 2013, expanded on the MI approach and included some new concepts including the four processes of MI conversations (engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning) and distinguishing between sustain talk and discord.

MI is defined as **“a collaborative conversation style for strengthening a person’s own motivation and commitment to change.”** MI can also be described as “a way of helping people talk themselves into changing.” This approach embodies “a mind-set and a heart-set” that includes partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evocation.

Motivational Interviewing is a guiding style that invites people to examine their own values and behaviors and come up with their own reasons to change. It doesn’t try to convince people or argue with them. Instead, it draws out people’s own hopes, experience, and wisdom about themselves, including whether or not to change. As William R. Miller says, “You already have what you need, and together let’s find it.”

People who are used to confronting and giving advice will often feel like they’re not “doing anything.” But, as Miller and Rollnick point out, the proof is in the outcome. More aggressive strategies often push people away. MI, on the other hand, increases the odds that people will give change a chance.