

# The Underlying Spirit of Motivational Interviewing

“MI is done for or with someone, not on or to them.”

Motivational Interviewing, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition

Imagine taking a drink of a carbonated beverage that has gone flat. It still tastes vaguely like itself, but the fizz has gone out of it. It’s no longer worth drinking, and you’ll probably pour it down the drain. The spirit, or the mind-set and heart-set, of MI is the “fizz” of health coaching conversations. It’s what provides the relational underpinning for everything else that happens in your work together.

In describing MI spirit, Miller and Rollnick write: “When we began teaching MI in the 1980s we tended to focus on technique, on how to do it. Over time we found, however, that something important was missing. As we watched trainees practicing MI, it was as though we had taught them the words but not the music ... This is when we began writing about the underlying spirit of MI, its mind-set and heart-set.” (Motivational Interviewing, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition)

Spirit is the way we are with people. It’s the sum of various aspects of our being, including our values, attitudes, actions, body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, and the words we speak.

Miller and Rollnick identify four elements of the spirit of MI: partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evocation. Each of these is related and also unique.

**PARTNERSHIP** – using a collaborative style; demonstrating genuine respect for the other person; inviting and placing a premium on the other’s knowledge, experience, and wisdom; sharing your own expertise when useful; dancing rather than wrestling

**ACCEPTANCE** – meeting people “where they’re at” without judging them; seeking to understand the “backstory” and conveying genuine empathy; believing in others’ intrinsic value and worth; believing in them; shining a light on the strengths you see in them, not just their deficits; acknowledging and honoring people’s right to self-determination.

**COMPASSION** – being in solidarity with people who are hurting or struggling without trying to jump in and “fix” the situation; being present to others in a manner that conveys “I’m here for you no matter what”; acting in ways that are in others’ best interests

**EVOCATION** – eliciting or “calling forth” from people what they already have inside—their concerns, hopes, knowledge, values, and wisdom; inviting them to imagine the possibility of change—their reasons if they were to change, how they might go about it, their sense of importance and confidence, who could help, what they might do as a next step.