

What Does MI Spirit Look Like?

PARTNERSHIP

"It is unwise to be too sure of one's own wisdom ..."

—Mahatma Gandhi

MI is a two-way street. It is quite literally an inter-view (between-looking at) in which two people explore an issue together. Both parties bring something of value to the table. As such, MI is a deeply collaborative approach.

Instead of the health coach assuming the role of sole expert, both parties use their expertise about the topic of focus. The expertise of the practitioner lies in the ability to embody the spirit and use the skills and strategies of MI to help people reflect on, explore, and decide what changes, if any, they want to make in their lives. The expertise clients bring is their own lived experience, including their hopes, concerns, values, strengths, wisdom, self-knowledge, and abilities.

ACCEPTANCE

"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

—Carl Rogers

Acceptance is an invitation to "come as you are." It is an attitude that conveys that whoever you are, whatever you believe, or however you act is not going to stand in the way of my belief in your intrinsic worth, dignity, and potential.

Acceptance is not the same as approval. It is a way of seeing people in the complexity of their humanity, acknowledging the good, the bad, and everything in between.

Acceptance is fundamentally an expression of deep empathy that seeks not to pass judgment, but to understand.

Yet another dimension of acceptance is a profound respect for people's desire to make their own choices. The desire for autonomy is deeply embedded in the human psyche. When we try to control or coerce, even in ways masked by kindness, we abandon the spirit of MI. This is nearly always counterproductive in helping relationships.

Acceptance also involves actively affirming the strengths, skills, and attributes that people possess. By focusing on these qualities, people often come to perceive

themselves in a new light and develop a renewed sense of hope and confidence in their ability to make positive changes.

COMPASSION

“Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what [people] have to carry rather than stand in judgment about how they carry it.”

—Greg Boyle

The spirit of MI is compassionate. It seeks the well-being of individuals we encounter who are suffering in some way or wrestling with a dilemma. Compassion is active, not passive. It does not keep its distance, but instead actively reaches out to others. Often this involves a willingness to come alongside people in their distress, quietly bear witness, and listen deeply—all without attempting to “make it all better.” We cannot overestimate the gift of presence. It is a tangible offering of hope and is often the first step towards healing and recovery.

We must also be compassionate with ourselves. It is difficult to truly care for others without caring for ourselves by fostering healthy, life-giving attitudes and practices.

It has been said that people who want to help in the worst way often do. In our eagerness to be helpful, we can easily succumb to taking control, assuming what people need, and unilaterally imposing solutions. Even when done with the best of intentions and couched in kindness, this “fixing” approach is fundamentally disrespectful to people we serve.

Compassion can take the form of advocating for and assisting people in their efforts to meet particular needs: writing a letter supporting a disability claim or housing application, making a phone call on someone’s behalf, helping to mediate a dispute, accompanying someone to an appointment. Partnering with individuals in such a manner is entirely consistent with compassion.

The practice of compassion is by no means limited to interpersonal relationships. Efforts to effect change on a larger scale are also very much in keeping with the underlying philosophy and spirit of MI. Being involved in advocating for systems change, increased resources, and fairer laws are all examples of MI in action at a macro level. Compassion involves acting in the other’s best interest and not our own.

EVOCATION

"The only true voyage of discovery ... would be not to visit new landscapes, but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to see the hundred universes that each of them sees."

—Marcel Proust

The fourth element of MI spirit, evocation, is foundational to the MI approach. Like drawing water from a well, the MI practitioner seeks to “call forth” from people what they already possess—their own life experience, values, wisdom, strengths, and motivation. “You have what you need and together we will find it” (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 21) is the underlying mindset of evocation.

MI challenges the assumption that people need to be filled with knowledge and insights from an outside expert. As it has been said, there is a much greater supply of advice than there is demand for it. Evoking taps into people’s priorities, concerns, ambivalence, and ideas about change. The practitioner’s quest to understand is primarily in the service of helping people come to a new self-understanding, which in turn is likely to impact their motivation to make positive changes in their lives.

The spirit of evocation provides a vital corrective lens through which we see others. This stance of “compassionate curiosity” fosters a healthy helping relationship. It has a positive impact on how people seeking assistance perceive themselves, the helping process, and their willingness to look into the mirror of their own lives.