

OARS: Affirmations

Affirmations are statements accompanied by congruent attitudes and actions that accentuate the positive about someone. They acknowledge and shine a light on a person's strengths, intentions, and efforts. In other words, they focus on the "good stuff."

In health coaching relationships, affirmations help to:

- Facilitate the engagement process
- Reduce defensiveness
- Build confidence in a person's ability to change
- Create and enhance hope

The purpose of offering affirmations is not to evaluate or show progress but to uncover, reveal, and highlight positive qualities that exist within someone. You may find that some individuals have never had someone honestly and specifically affirm who they are in this way. A genuine, well-placed affirmation can have a significant positive impact on a person.

Dennis Saleebey, in *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice* (2002), offers various sources of strengths that people possess from which a health coach could affirm a specific quality or attribute.

- Learned skills
- Innate talents
- Personal virtues and traits
- Interpersonal skills
- Cultural knowledge and lore
- Family stories and narratives
- Knowledge from struggling against adversity
- Knowledge from one's roles
- Spirituality and faith
- Hopes and dreams

Affirmations must be genuine and from the heart. People will know if they seem contrived and might be less likely to trust you. Effective affirming statements are specific and personalized.

Descriptive affirmations are much more powerful than broad generalizations. In addition, affirmations tend to be more effective when used sparsely. Quality is more important than quantity.

Statements of affirmation are unconditional; they don't depend on results. Affirmations focus on who people are rather than on their accomplishments. Affirmations are not the same as praise. Praise is evaluative and generally focuses on the practitioner's opinion or judgment ("Great job" "I'm so proud of you."). Praise is more like a "pat on the back" or a "hooray" for what a person has done.

The underlying message of praise is that you are valued for what you do or achieve, not who you are. One must earn praise. Praise can be given and just as easily withdrawn depending on the expectations or approval of the praise-giver. Praising tends to imply a "one-up" position and detracts from the MI spirit of partnership. In contrast to praise, affirmations don't have to be earned and are deeper, more fundamental observations about a person's strengths, values, and character.

When forming affirmations, it's usually best to avoid starting with "I" and instead center the comment on "you." It's also helpful to not only use a "positive label" (e.g., loyal, committed, assertive, thoughtful) but to include a description specific to what you have observed or see in the person.

AFFIRMATIONS TYPICALLY FOCUS ON

- Highlighting positive traits or skills
- Prizing of the person in general
- Emphasizing intentions and actions
- Reframing actions or situations in a positive light

Here are a few examples of affirmations:

- You've been really persistent in the way you've stuck with your Paleo diet despite many temptations to do otherwise.
- That took a lot of courage to stand up for yourself and say no in that situation.
- In regard to this decision about your health, you know what's best for you, and you aren't going to be easily swayed.

- Even though you didn't quite meet your goal of going to the gym three times this past week, your intentions were positive.
- You put a lot of careful planning into taking time for self-care this past weekend.
- Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today.

Eliciting from people what they see as their own strengths is also very much a part of effective health coaching. However, it is not uncommon for individuals to have difficulty acknowledging their own strong suits. Sometimes we all lose sight of our own positive attributes and internal resources. Thus, it is valuable for health coaches to seek, highlight, and give voice to the inherent worth, positive traits, strengths, and skills that people possess.

From a motivational interviewing perspective, affirmations embody all four elements of MI spirit: partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evocation. In particular, affirmations prize people for who they are, demonstrate a compassionate stance, evoke and name their strengths, and foster self-direction.

Like the other OARS, we use affirmations throughout the four processes of MI. In engaging, they are useful in building rapport and facilitating engagement while honoring the motivation that the person brings into the interaction. During focusing, affirming statements highlight intentions and aspirations for change. Throughout evoking, a person's goals, values, courage, and willingness to explore change might be among the sources of affirmation, and affirmations during the planning process can highlight strengths and resources while cultivating hope and strengthening confidence.