

# OARS: Summaries

In addition to using open questions, affirmations, and reflective statements, providing summaries is a fourth core skill for health coaches to use in conversations with clients.

A summary is a collection of selected reflective statements that draw together and highlight key aspects of what a person has said. Summaries can be used at various times to pause the conversation, step back, and recap points made by the client. A summary statement essentially asks, “This is what I think I’ve heard thus far. What have I missed or what would you add to that?”

Summary statements, while used sparingly in motivational conversations, can have a significant impact. In addition to demonstrating that the practitioner has been listening attentively over an extended period of time, summaries can help people “connect the dots” of their own thinking in a different way than before. This, in turn, often leads to greater clarity that can help strengthen a person’s motivation to change.

Deciding what to choose to include in a summary is like picking the tastiest chocolates from a sampler box or collecting the most colorful seashells at the beach. In MI, we select what to include in a summary based on the context of the conversation and what seems most useful.

In some cases, the health coach might offer a summary to primarily convey empathy or to highlight both sides of a person’s ambivalence. Other times, summaries are used to accentuate a person’s “change talk”—statements about desire, need, or plan to change.

There are three basic styles of summary statements:

1. **Collecting summaries** pull together “in one basket” various statements the person has made.
2. **Linking summaries** connect what the individual has said with something they said in a prior conversation.
3. **Transitional summaries** are used as a wrap-up at the end of a conversation or to create a bridge for shifting the conversation.

In all three cases, emphasis is typically placed on shining a light on any change talk that people express—their hopes, desires, intentions, reasons, methods, importance, and confidence to change.

Summaries, like the other OARS skills, are used throughout the four processes of MI. Particularly in the engaging and focusing processes, providing summaries shows that you have been listening carefully and that you value what the person has said. They also provide an opportunity for asking the person to fill in what you have missed.

In the evoking process, summaries are often used to emphasize things that support a person's change goal. During the planning process of MI, summaries are generally used to recap the person's reasons for wanting to change and what they intend to do. This can help strengthen commitment to make the change.

Below are some guidelines for developing and offering summaries. Remember to keep summaries relatively brief and to the point.

1. Begin with a statement indicating you are making a summary. For example:
  - Let me see if I understand thus far.
  - Here's the gist of what I think I've heard overall.
2. Provide empathy and understanding. For example:
  - You've been feeling overwhelmed about ...
  - This came as a total surprise to you.
  - It's confusing to you why.
3. Acknowledge both sides of ambivalence you're hearing. For example:
  - You're feeling two ways about this. Part of you ... and another part of you...
  - On the one hand, you're feeling kind of anxious about trying this new diet, and on the other hand, you're kind of excited about the possible benefits.
4. Highlight change talk that you heard. For example:
  - You have a strong desire to decrease the stress in your life.
  - You mentioned several reasons why you might want to make a change in this area, including ... (state the reasons you heard).
5. End with an invitation. For example:
  - What would you add to that?
  - What have I missed?
  - What other thoughts, if any, does this bring up for you?