

HOST: You feel strongly about this. [Reflection]

RELATIVE: Yes, I do! It's a matter of faith for me.

HOST: And I know that your faith is important to you. You try to live your life in a way that is true to what you believe. [Affirmation]

RELATIVE: I do. It's hard sometimes, but it's how I want to live.

HOST: Even when it's difficult. [Reflection, continuing the paragraph]

RELATIVE: I get into some real arguments with people who don't agree with me. I don't know; maybe you don't agree with me. [Potential discord]

HOST: What I value is that we are family, and I care about you. [Affirmation]

RELATIVE: That means a lot. We're family.

HOST: How about this. I would like to hear more about what you think on this hot topic. I want to just listen so I can understand you better, without interrupting, agreeing, or disagreeing. Actually, I need more practice in listening to people on hot topics like this because I think we should be listening to each other more even when it's hard. Are you willing to do that? [Asking permission]

RELATIVE: Just talk about what I believe?

HOST: Yes, and why it matters to you. What you really care about.

RELATIVE: And you're not going to argue with me?

HOST: Nope. I may ask you a few questions, but mostly I just want to listen and understand what you think and feel on issues like this. Is that OK with you?

RELATIVE: Sure. Talking about myself is easy.

HOST: Good! So tell me a little more about what you were saying before.

The relative is right; it's easy for most people to talk about what they believe. It's the host who has the more challenging job here: sticking with pure empathic listening. I (Bill) intentionally did this recently with several friends whose political views were, I suspected, different from my own (which actually could be almost anyone). I spent an hour practicing reflective listening with each of them, and I unexpectedly found that once I put on my listening hat, it was surprisingly easy. That's all I had to do—just listen well! No other agenda. When we finished an hour, one of my friends said, “Now I want to listen to your views” and he did.¹⁷

Beyond Engaging Skills

MI is much more than good listening. The vital person-centered skills are then applied in purposeful ways to help people move toward change.¹⁸

Empathic listening can be done without any particular goal in mind.¹⁹ In MI, the *focusing* task (Chapters 5 and 9) identifies specific change goals toward which you then move using some technical skills for evoking motivation for change.²⁰

First among these skills, you need to be able to *recognize* change talk, sustain talk, and discord as especially important natural occurrences that signal whether you are headed toward or away from change. You therefore train your ear to *notice* these particular forms of speech when you hear them. If you fail to notice them, you can't intentionally adjust your own responses accordingly. You should also promptly notice conversational patterns that are likely to be detrimental. For example, if you find yourself arguing for change while the other person is arguing against it, you should recognize that it's time to adjust what you're doing. MI involves ongoing in-the-moment awareness of what is happening in the language of change, with particular alertness for change talk, sustain talk, and discord.

Second, as discussed in our chapters on the evoking process, you don't just wait for change talk to happen, but you *invite* it. You arrange the interview to evoke change talk through strategic use of OARS, for example by consciously asking *particular* questions rather than others. MI therefore also involves ongoing in-the-moment awareness of your own speech and the person's reactions to them. You think one step ahead. "If I ask this question, how is this person likely to respond?" "Where is there change talk in what I just heard, and how can I invite more of it?"

Third, within the evoking task, you consciously respond in ways intended to *strengthen* change talk. Thus, an important part of MI is what you say *next* after you hear change talk. You differentially reflect, affirm, and summarize change talk when you hear it and pay close attention to how the person responds. The technical skills of evoking thus involve recognizing, inviting, and then strengthening change talk.

After you hear change talk,
what will you say next.

Here is an example of practicing MI skills beyond engaging. The setting is an after-school program in which students can

enroll, staffed by volunteer tutors. The student is a 10-year-old boy, Liam, who is reading below the expected level for grade 5 and worried about going on to middle school next year. The tutor is a retired high school geography teacher. They were introduced and visited the Book Café together where Liam picked out two books that looked interesting to him.

TUTOR: I know both of the books you chose. What did you like about them?

LIAM: This one has a couple of boys looking down a deep hole and I wonder what's in it.

TUTOR: You want to find out. [Reflection, continuing the paragraph]

LIAM: Yeah. And this one has all kinds of things on the cover—some kind of castle, a horse, kids; this looks like a dog or a lion, and a big face up here, I can't tell what kind of face it is.

TUTOR: Just the cover makes you curious, like you want to know the story. [Reflection]

LIAM: I like books with more pictures, though.

TUTOR: They're easier for you. [Reflection, a guess]

LIAM: And it gives me a picture of what's happening; it helps me imagine it.

TUTOR: Books let us imagine things we've never seen. [Reflection]

LIAM: Do you do that, imagine things?

TUTOR: I do! I like to imagine places where I've never been. It sounds like you do that, too. What do you enjoy most about stories? [Evocative question: Desire]

LIAM: I don't know what's going to happen next.

TUTOR: It's kind of exciting like an adventure, wondering where the story will go next. [Reflecting change talk]

LIAM: But books like this are hard; I get tired and don't remember what I read. [Sustain talk]

TUTOR: And yet here you are, staying after school to get better at reading. Why did you sign up? [Evocative question: Reasons]

LIAM: My teacher said I should. I do want to be able to read better. I need to. [Change talk] Next year I'll be in sixth grade and it will be harder.

TUTOR: You're looking ahead and want to be ready. [Reflecting change talk] And, also I do see that interest and curiosity in you, ready to discover and hear more stories. [Affirmation] There are stories on TV and movies, too, but you know what I love about reading books?

LIAM: What?

TUTOR: It lets me use my imagination. Instead of making up the pictures for me, I can see them in my mind. So let's try it, OK? [Asking permission]

LIAM: All right.

TUTOR: Which book should we start on? [Offering choice]

LIAM: This one—*Holes*. Will you read to me?

TUTOR: I'll start off and we can take turns, a page at a time.

LIAM: OK.

TUTOR: (*Reads a page and then has Liam read the second page to get a sense of his reading ability.*) That's Chapter 1. What are you already wondering about? [Open question]

LIAM: I don't know who's telling the story. It's some kind of camp, but

there's also a warden and poisonous snakes and stuff. What's going on?

TUTOR: Good! Two pages and you're already curious. Chapter 2 is just one page—my turn. (*Reads it.*) So now what do you know?

LIAM: It's a boy named Stanley, and it's like a prison camp of some kind. He did something bad, and that's why he's out there in the desert.

TUTOR: What do you think will happen next?

Liam is already engaging with the Tutor and the story. Beyond engaging, the Tutor already has a shared focus (“I want to be able to read better”) and has been evoking some motivation in the form of change talk. The immediate emphasis is not on problems and deficits but on interests and abilities. The Tutor is already using some strategies that can strengthen reading skills, but it flows like an interesting conversation.

Softening Sustain Talk and Discord

There is more than change talk to attend to when practicing MI. You are listening more broadly to the person's emerging story and reactions, and are remembering the horizon toward which you have agreed to move. You are considering possibilities for what you could say and how the person might respond. You are monitoring your own reactions, letting go of the fixing reflex, perhaps clearing your mind so as not to obstruct the person's own explorations of change, and all the while keeping the foundational spirit of MI in the background: partnership, acceptance, compassion, and empowerment. That's quite a lot to keep in mind.

In all this, you are also prepared to respond to something at least as important as change talk. In fact, some research now suggests it may be *more* important—which is the sustain talk and discord described in Chapter 14. These matter because if they continue, they do not bode well for change. In MI there are particular ways for responding to sustain talk and discord so as not to strengthen them. A key here is not to let negativity hook you into a fixing reflex, but rather to continue responding with the same empathic spirit and approach. There is not really a different set of skills for this; the overall MI approach is the same. The most common and often effective responses are reflections, which are sometimes amplified a bit or offered in double-sided format. Once again, your most important cue is how the person responds to what you say. It can take a while to soften sustain talk or discord, but they should be decreasing in intensity. If you see *increasing* negativity, try a different approach from what you were just doing. The person across from you is your best teacher for finding the right way forward.

Here's an example of an angry restaurant employee who has been pulled into the supervisor's office after a brief incident with a couple of customers.

SUPERVISOR: You were kind of annoyed with those customers. [Reflection, understating]

SERVER: Sorry I got riled up. It's like they were ganging up on me.

SUPERVISOR: What especially bothered you? [Open question]

SERVER: They couldn't make up their minds and they kept changing; then when I brought them what they ordered they said it wasn't right and blamed me.

SUPERVISOR: That can be frustrating when it doesn't seem like it's your fault. [Reflection] What do you think might have happened? [Open question]

SERVER: They probably didn't remember what they ordered when they finally made up their minds. I don't think I got it wrong.

SUPERVISOR: You're pretty sure you got the order right. [Reflection]

SERVER: I am fairly sure. I wrote it down. But the way they lit into me!

SUPERVISOR: So you think you were doing everything right, and at the same time you seem to know you didn't handle this well. [Reflection, double-sided]

SERVER: Yes, but it wasn't my fault.

SUPERVISOR: It's not a matter of who's to blame, so don't worry about that. We get all kinds of customers in here. What do you think you should have done? [Open question]

SERVER: Instead of saying "Whatever" and walking away?

SUPERVISOR: Right.

SERVER: Take a deep breath and say nothing?

SUPERVISOR: That's one possibility. Now from your training here, what is the restaurant's priority with customers?

SERVER: Good food, good service, and we want them to come back.

SUPERVISOR: Even if you don't personally hope they come back. [Continuing the paragraph, lending change talk]

SERVER: (*Grins.*) Right. Sorry.

SUPERVISOR: You do good work. I like you, and I want you to stay here and learn. [Affirmation] So what else might you have said to them? [Open question]

SERVER: I'm sorry it's not what you wanted. What can I bring you?