

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Preparing for Change

Volume II in MI Series

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Summary/Conclusions

In this guide, published by the National Institute of Corrections, the authors define Motivational Interviewing (MI), discuss how MI fits into the discipline of corrections, and provide the reader with a description of MI techniques. The guide is of significant length, so this summary covers only one chapter. Subsequent Research in Briefs will summarize more information from the guide.

This Chapter describes four basic techniques, referred to as OARS, probation officers (PO) can use to elicit change talk. In using the techniques, the PO assists probationers to prepare for and move toward change.

Limitations of Information

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a highly skilled set of techniques, which requires training, practice, and ongoing feedback. Although ideas for engaging probationers are suggested, it is recommended the reader complete the MI training and have ongoing feedback to ensure optimal effectiveness.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Preparing for Change Using OARS

In this chapter, the reader is introduced to basic techniques of Motivational Interviewing (MI). Noting that many probation officers (PO) “want to jump straight to problem solving,” the authors advise against this. Instead, it is recommended the PO lay the groundwork by first preparing the probationer for change. Four techniques to guide the probationer to change talk are described. Referred to as OARS, these techniques include: open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, and summarizing.

O: Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a single yes or no but require the respondent to think more about the answer. These types of questions lend themselves to information gathering and may require careful consideration by the probationer.

A: Sometimes PO’s may feel it is difficult to find probationer behavior worthy of praise; however, positive reinforcement is a powerful tool. “Incentives, and especially verbal recognition, must be part of the equation. Positive statements build rapport, provide feedback, and make positive behaviors more likely.” A good guideline is four affirmations or incentives to one sanction.

R: Reflections echo back what the PO thinks he heard. It isn’t agreeing with the probationer but clarifying what’s been said. Reflections “may repeat or rephrase what an offender has said, summarize an emotion, or point out mixed feelings.” If you are on target, the conversation will continue; if you are not, the probationer will correct you.

S: Summaries are reflections but are focused more broadly. They can be used

to transition between ideas or may complete an office visit. “Summaries remind the offender about major discussion points, the plan of action, and the offender’s own reasons for taking action.”

Practical Applications

√ Instead of asking questions, which lead to a yes/no response, try these: “What else?” “What drugs have you tried?” “What’s it like at your job?” “What other ways have you tried to solve that problem?” “Who can help?”

√ Affirmations worth trying: “Thanks for coming in today.” “I was glad to see you paid the fine.” “You must really enjoy your job.” “How were you able to do that?”

√ Ideas for incentives: decreased drug testing, motion to waive fees, compliments, fewer appointments, use Offender Services money to pay for a treatment episode, travel privileges, later curfew.

√ Practice reflections by compacting the probationer’s words or main ideas down to just a few: “You worked hard.” “You’re angry.” “Sounds like it was frustrating.” “You’ve got ideas on how to get another job.”

√ Reflections can also be used by completing a probationer’s thought or statement: “...and that would be hard.” “...and you wouldn’t be able to work.”

√ Summarize by stating the specific points discussed, the probationer’s reasons for change, the “plan of action,” and the date/time of the next appointment.