

# Research in Brief

## Motivating Probationers to Change

Volume IV in MI Series

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**Key Words:** Evidence-based practices, motivational interviewing, sanctions, response to violations

### 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 guides the reader through addressing deception, violations, and imposing sanctions with a motivational style. Probation Officers (PO's) must be up front with probationers; first by informing them of sanctions at the onset of supervision, and second, addressing violations immediately.

### Limitations of Information

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a highly skilled set of techniques, which requires training, practice and ongoing feedback. Although suggestions for ways to engage 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.

### Managing Deception and Violations with MI

In probation, deception is a common occurrence that takes many forms. Probationers may not tell the truth, may provide half the truth, or they may omit facts about the truth. Probationers lie for three reasons: to save face, to protect someone they care about, or to prevent a perceived loss of freedom or resources. Subsequently, many probationers don't deceive to con the probation officer (PO), but they use deception to protect their perceptions of who they are or what they have.

One of the best ways to deal with deception is to minimize it. PO's, who use motivational interviewing (MI), will typically develop positive relationships, which make deception less likely. Using MI helps lower a probationer's defenses and allows a more collaborative, common-sense approach to probation supervision.

For some PO's trained in MI, there is a temptation to take a confrontational approach when addressing violations; however, MI can be used to facilitate accountability. The PO must remember they are a facilitator between the court and the probationer. For example, when the probationer is demonstrating lack of progress, the PO should take a neutral position. The facts are laid out for the probationer, then the PO clearly outlines the possible sanctions. It is then up to the probationer to become compliant or accept the sanctions. The PO should not take the non-compliance personally, and the sanction should be enforced if necessary. It should be noted, "A probationer on supervision does not have to complete the supervision conditions: he always has the op-

tion of taking the sanction." Compliance is a choice for the probationer, he owns the choice and the subsequent results.

### Practical Applications

- √ At the initial appointment, explain to probationers the dual role of a PO. You are responsible to provide information to the court and you are also assigned to advocate for the probationer. You are a facilitator between the court and the probationer, emphasizing the responsibility for success is ultimately on the probationer.
- √ When a probationer denies a positive UA, the PO should present the results, not defend the test or the protocol, but lay out the possible sanctions and options. It is not necessary for the probationer to admit his use.
- √ When a probationer starts supervision by denying the instant offense, the PO should briefly acknowledge the probationer's belief but not argue. Avoid defending the court, police, etc. and focus on the supervision conditions, emphasizing personal responsibility for future acts.
- √ Address violations with a neutral attitude, making sure the probationer understands the situation is the result of his actions and is his responsibility. The PO should deal with the behavior and not take the probationer's choice personally.

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