

MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING (MI) IN SCHOOLS

A practical guide for educators supporting trauma-affected students

WHAT IS MI?

- A collaborative conversation style — not a lecture — that draws out the student's own reasons for change.
- The student's motivation comes from within, not from the teacher.
- Built on trust, empathy, and a non-judgmental partnership.
- Supports meaningful change that aligns with the student's values



Partnership

Working
"with"
rather than
"to"
students



Acceptance

Affirming
the
student's
worth and
self-
direction



Compassion

Actively
promoting
the
student's
welfare and
well-being



Evocation

Draw out the
student's own
motivation
and strengths

CORE MI SKILLS: OARS



OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Start with "How," "What," or "Tell me about..." to encourage the student to process their experience.

Instead of: "Why didn't you do your school work?"

Say: "What made it hard to get started today?" or
"What do you think is getting in the way of things going better for you?"



AFFIRMATIONS

Provide specific praise for appropriate behavior, efforts, strengths, or qualities.

Instead of: "Good job today."

Say: "I see you are working really hard and I am proud of you for staying in control of your emotions in this difficult situation."



REFLECTIVE LISTENING

Listen carefully, then reflect back what the student said — or the feeling and meaning underneath — to show understanding and keep them exploring.

Student: "I hate this class, it's stupid."

Teacher: "It sounds like you're really frustrated with this class..."

I wonder if you're feeling discouraged because the work feels impossible right now."

If the student responds negatively:

Teacher: "I wonder what could be going on..." "Help me understand..."



SUMMARIES

Collect, link, and reflect back what the student has shared to show understanding and move forward.

Student: "I want to stop getting in fights but the other student always starts it."

Teacher: "It sounds like part of you wants things to be different, but another part of you feels like this is out of your control. I hear that things are really difficult right now—and I've also heard you say that you don't want things to stay this way, which is really important."

Instead of...

Try this



Telling the student what to do (giving advice)



Asking permission to share information and elicit their ideas.



Persuading or lecturing



Draws out the student's own reasons



Rapid-fire questioning



Uses reflections more than questions



Using fear or pressure to motivate change



Exploring the student's own values and reasons for change



Confronting resistance



Rolls with resistance



Setting goals for the student without their input



Collaborating with the student to set their own achievable goals and concrete steps that align with their goals

The MI Process: Four Phases

Engaging

Build rapport and express empathy.
Create a comfortable space.
Meet the student where they are — not yet problem-solving.

Focusing

Collaboratively identify what the student wants to address.
Start wide, narrows over time.
Guided by the student, not imposed by the teacher.

Presenting

Share helpful facts and relevant information to support informed decision-making.
Ask what the students want to know.
Share input if they are receptive.

Evoking

Draw out the student's own reasons for change.
Ask, don't tell (avoid giving advice too quickly).
Support their voice, not direct it.
"What are you thinking about doing knowing this?"

Planning

When the student is ready, build a realistic plan together with concrete next steps and timelines.
Talk through possible obstacles and setbacks.
Encourage self-compassion and flexible thinking.

Classroom Script Bank

To open the conversation..

"Tell me about a typical day."
"Tell me about a day when it has gone well."
"Tell me about a day when it has not gone so well."
"Help me understand..."
"How's that worked for you?"

To show you're listening...

"It sounds like you are feeling..."
"If I hear you correctly you seem..."
"So, you are saying that you are conflicted about..."
"It's been difficult for you..."
"You're struggling with..."

To gently invite change...

"You are starting to feel like you want to change..."
"Something about...is starting to feel not right for you."
"...has started to worry you a bit more."
"If your goal is..., what are some next steps you would like to take?"