



**Becoming a Better Mentor:
Strategies to Be There for Young People**

CHAPTER 11

EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Samuel D. McQuillin – University of South Carolina



MENTOR



Talking about behavior change with your mentee is one of the riskier activities you'll engage in as a mentor.

These conversations could be simple nudges for your mentee to complete their homework, or more serious exchanges such as a discussion about avoiding risky sexual behavior. Such conversations can be hazardous because they have the potential to disrupt your relationship as well as make behavior change less likely. Take Jorge, for example, a mentor who is deeply concerned about his mentee's newfound interest in vaping. Jorge, with his mentee Paco's health in mind, confronts the problem: "You're going to make yourself sick with the vaping, you have to stop." Although common sense might suggest this is the right thing to say, research evidence suggests just the opposite. This attempt to alter Paco's choices and behavior will not be successful. In fact, Paco's relationship with Jorge will be compromised — he'll be less likely to ask Jorge for help in making future decisions and may even be more likely to continue vaping than he would have if the conversation had never happened. The good news is that psychologists, counselors, and researchers have discovered that some approaches to having conversations about behavior change can be tremendously helpful and can help mentors like Jorge mitigate the risks of such conversations.

What Does Having Effective Conversations about Behavior Change Mean?

This chapter will focus on a style of communication designed to help motivate young people to make

choices that are consistent with their values. Readers will learn how to avoid potentially harmful behaviors when having conversations about behavior change, and how to encourage young people who experience *ambivalence*, or the competing motivations for and against behavior change. The content in this chapter is based on research of the counseling style of Motivational Interviewing or "MI."

Why Effective Conversations about Behavior Change Are Important in Mentoring Relationships

So, what went wrong with Jorge's attempt to save his mentee from the perils of vaping? Jorge's approach was guided by something researchers, Drs. William Miller and Steven Rollnick, call, the *righting reflex*, or the reflexive tendency of helpers to "right" a "wrong" in someone else. These righting reflexes can look like war stories (e.g., sharing a tragic incident from your past related to the current behaviors of your mentee), giving unsolicited advice ("If you started running in the morning, you would probably have more energy in the afternoon"), sharing a warning ("Vaping will kill you!"), providing a suggestion in the form of a question ("Have you tried studying more?"), moralizing ("Cursing is wrong, you should stop"), and so on. There are dozens of righting reflexes, and they all share one common feature: **the motivation for change comes from the person doing the righting, not the person who could benefit from changing their behavior.** We use the term "reflex" to indicate that this is a nearly universal problem among helpers. It doesn't make the helper bad, it just makes their attempts to influence another's behavior less likely to help, and more likely to harm. So, perhaps the most important strategy for helping your mentee make choices is more about what you don't do (i.e., the righting reflex) than what you do.

¹ Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.



Attempts to persuade people to change their behaviors often backfire, making people less likely to change, less likely to seek help or insight from the persuader, and more likely to resist future conversations about behavior change. This is particularly true for adolescents. Mentors are at great risk for disrupting their relationship when they use directive, confrontational, or persuasive approaches to these conversations. Research-based practices, discussed below, including active listening, accurate expressions of empathy and understanding, and evocative questions help mentors mitigate these potentially harmful behaviors and increase the likelihood that mentees will make value-consistent choices that enhance their wellbeing.

Why is it that people resist attempts at persuasion? One reason is that most people have competing motivations for and against changing, which is referred to as “ambivalence.” Change might involve leaving something behind, trying something new, quitting a comfortable habit, or exerting yourself beyond your typical comfort zone. All of these things, to some extent, highlight reasons why people might not want to change. Even if a mentor understands all the benefits of changing a particular behavior, in all likelihood the mentee is plagued by ambivalence. Take Paco, for example, he may be aware of some risks associated with vaping but might also enjoy how the smoke feels in his mouth and how relaxed he feels from the buzz of nicotine, he may experience elevated social status among his peers for exercising autonomy, and so on. When people are ambivalent about change, they resist attempts at persuasion by others. For example, you might want to run more in the morning, but you also like staying up late watching Netflix. You have two behaviors that compete for your choice. Ambivalence is a normal part of being human. We

all experience ambivalence, whether it is in the challenge of quitting problematic habits, in picking up new helpful habits, or in putting into action the key steps necessary to achieve a long-term goal — ambivalence is always hanging around, like a tug-of-war for our decisions.

What Does Effective Conversation about Behavior Change Look Like in Action?

So, what can mentors do if they can’t “right a wrong?” A key place to start is creating a mentoring atmosphere that is characterized by compassion, acceptance, and empathy (see chapter 1). Although creating such an environment looks different for each relationship, there are a few questions mentors may ask themselves to begin thinking about how their mentoring atmosphere feels to their mentee, or how it might be improved. Put yourself in the shoes of your mentee, and ask yourself the following questions:

- How do I know my mentor respects me?
- How do I feel after I meet with my mentor?
- How do I know my mentor understands me?
- What do I expect my mentor to do when I share sensitive information?

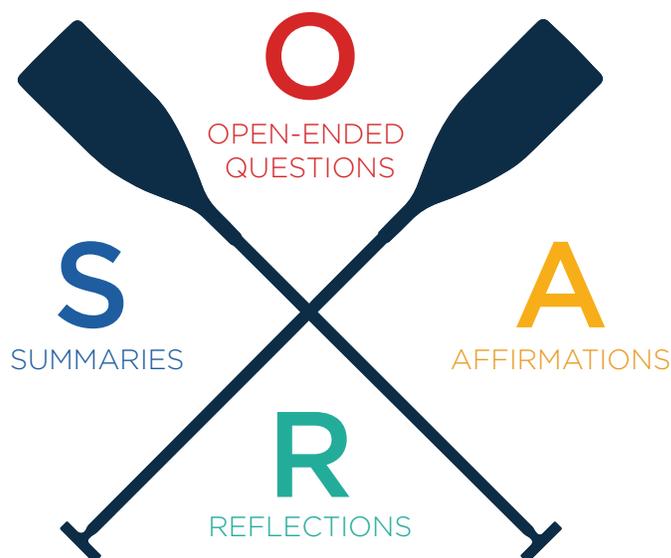
Creating an atmosphere of acceptance involves communicating an unconditional positive appraisal of your mentee’s worth and value. To your mentee, it feels like, “No matter what, I can count on my mentor to treat me with respect, dignity, and kindness.” In this atmosphere, regardless of your mentee’s choices, they can count on you to accept them as they are. Importantly, acceptance is different from agreement. Acceptance expresses your unchanging feelings about your mentee’s worth and dignity; agreement, on the other hand, communicates approval of your mentee’s choices or behaviors. There will be many times when mentors



disagree with their mentee’s choices or behaviors, but the most effective mentors will accept their mentee throughout these differences and avoid the righting reflex. If a mentor hasn’t established this type of atmosphere, conversations about behavior change won’t be very helpful and, in general, mentors should avoid these conversations if their relationship doesn’t have that foundation.

One way to begin building such an atmosphere is understanding your mentee’s values and perspectives. This can be accomplished by asking your mentee about their values, “What are the most important things in your life right now?” or “How would you like your life to be different next semester?” You may also use more focused activities to take a deeper dive into values. Activities, like a “value card sort,” can be particularly helpful, especially if mentees are less talkative. In this activity, a mentee sorts cards that have values written on them (e.g., “Making My Parents Proud”; “Being Kind”; “Being a Hard Worker”; “Loving God”, etc.). When making these cards, try to tailor some of them to what you know about your mentee, but also include statements about broad categories that all youth might have values around, such as school, friendships, ambitions, and how they treat others. Mentees are then asked to sort these cards into three piles, Very Important, Important, or Not Important. It can be helpful to limit the Very Important stack to five or so cards to encourage the mentee to think about what really matters to them. During this activity, it’s important to withhold judgement if your mentee rates things that you find valuable as not valuable (or vice versa). Focus on the things they find valuable. It can be helpful to ask for examples, such as, “I see that you put making your parents proud as one of your very important values. Can you tell me what that looks like? At school? At home? How do you make your parents proud?”

An atmosphere of acceptance, compassion, and curiosity about your mentee’s values and perspectives is a starting point for having helpful conversations about behavior change. In fact, this atmosphere is one part of a two-piece explanation for why MI works. That is, research suggests two main reasons why people change their behavior following conversations about behavior change: 1) They feel accepted and understood (the “relational component” of MI); and 2) They make statements that favor change (the “technical component” of MI). The relational component is facilitated by asking **open-ended questions** (e.g., “What is your perspective on this?”), making **affirmations** (e.g., “Thank you for being honest with me”; “You are working hard”), **reflections** (e.g., “This must be really frustrating and challenging for you right now”), and **summaries** (i.e., statements that take stock of the conversation). These statements — **Open-ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections, and Summaries** (or **OARS** for short) — are the backbone of helpful conversations about behavior change. The technical and relational components of MI help increase the likelihood that a mentee feels understood while





mitigating the righting reflex — both of which pave the way for thoughtful conversations about resolving ambivalence. The technical component builds on the relational component in a way that evokes (i.e., brings from within the mentee) change talk, or statements that favor changing.

The value card sort is a great opportunity to build an atmosphere of acceptance through using the **OARS**. Mentors can ask evocative open-ended questions (“What is something you could do this week to make your parents proud?”), provide affirmations (“I can tell you really care about your family”), make reflections (“Prayer is a big part of your life”), or provide summaries, like the following:

We talked about this one value of making your parents proud. This is a big one for you. Maybe the most important right now. You make your parents proud by being a helper around the house, by doing the right thing at school, and by getting good grades. You mentioned that one way you could continue to make your parents proud would be to bring up some of your grades that they’ve been hassling you about. Did I miss anything about that value?

Once you’ve established an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding, you can begin focusing the conversation. **Focusing** is a process through which the direction of the conversation becomes clearer. A mentoring program that serves students who have been expelled from school might have a focus that is clear to the mentor (i.e., school reentry), but the mentee might not be there yet. Part of the focusing process will involve the mentor finding a common ground in which to work with the mentee:

We have a few options for what to talk about today. You’ve shared a bit about concerns with your girlfriend right now, and whether or not it’s going to work out now that you’re not around the school anymore. I’d also like to talk a bit about the school reentry plan, but you might have something else that’s more pressing. What do you think?

In a less targeted program, or perhaps in a mentoring relationship outside of a program context, the focus of the conversation might be informed by a concerning disclosure from the mentee, as in Paco’s example above, or a precipitating event, for example a disappointing report card. In cases like this, the mentor should use discretion in focusing so as to avoid the sense that the mentor is forcing the conversation. Ask permission to discuss these things: “I noticed your report card was upsetting to you. I wonder if we might chat a little bit about it today?” Alternatively, the focus of the conversation might be the product of a goal-setting process, in which the mentee has a particular goal in mind. Focusing is like laying a map on the table in front of you and your mentee, and then deciding the general direction of the conversation. Are we going to Toronto or Detroit?

Once there is a general focus of the conversation, the mentor can begin evoking change talk. Using the map analogy, evoking is like figuring out, and then reinforcing, why the mentee might want to go where they’re headed. Remember, MI works, in part, because the person being helped uses change talk, or statements that favor change. How do you know change talk when you hear it? One helpful acronym is **DARN**, which stands for **D**esire, **A**bility, **R**easons, and **N**eeds. **Desires** are statements that express the relative advantages of change, or positive expectations surrounding change: “I want to be at



the same school as my friends next year.” **Ability** statements reflect the confidence of the mentee to make the change: “I could totally stop vaping. I’m not addicted.” **Reasons** for change are typically represented in if-then statements: “If I could control my anger, I would fight less.” These might be things that your mentee may not really want, but that they can recognize as true. For example, sometimes it can be helpful to make a list of reasons for and against changing. Some of your mentee’s reasons for change may not be particularly appealing, or they may lack confidence to accomplish the reason, but they still recognize it as true. **Needs** are often expressed with statements that include words like “I have to ...” or “I must ...” They express an intense dissatisfaction with the status quo or a clear problem with the current situation: “Alternative school sucks. I’ve got to get out of this place.” One of the key skills in conversations about behavior change is the ability to hear change talk, even when it is sandwiched with a bunch of “sustain talk” (i.e., the opposite of change talk).

How does a mentor influence a mentee’s use of change talk? Well, the easiest way is to simply ask for it, with open-ended questions: “What do you think are some benefits of vaping less?”; “If you decided to stop fighting at school, what would be different?”; “Why would you want to improve your grades?” Questions like these ask the mentee to reflect on their DARNs, and elicit change talk. Importantly, these questions evoke the mentee’s (as opposed to the mentor’s) motivation to change.

You can also use a strategy called *importance* and *confidence rulers*. An importance ruler is when you ask how important change is for your mentee in a particular area: “On a scale from 1 to 10, how important is it for you to cut back on vaping, where 1 is not important at all, and 10 is,

like, really important?” Using this example, imagine that your mentee indicates they are currently at a three. You could evoke change talk by asking “Why are you at a three, and not at a one or zero?” Importantly, note that the evocative mentor asks a question that elicits change talk (i.e., “Why is it that important?”). However, using an importance ruler like this can be a bit tricky, and some mentors fall into the trap of the righting reflex. You can imagine the mentor who is dismayed that quitting is not a higher priority, asking “What!? Why only a three? Don’t you know the risks?” This type of response actually asks for sustain talk, instead of change talk, and risks shutting down the conversation and ultimately harming the relationship. The confidence ruler is similar, except it asks about how confident your mentee feels: “On a scale from 1 to 10, how confident are you that you could cut back on vaping, say, to like one or two times per week, with 1 being you are completely sure you couldn’t, and 10 being it would be really easy.” Let’s say the mentee responds with a four. The evocative mentor would then ask why a four and not a zero, evoking “ability talk” (i.e., talk about the mentee’s confidence and ability to achieve their goal). The mentor may also ask a question to help partner with the mentee, something like, “What would it take, say, if you and I worked together on something, for you to feel a little bit more confident, like going from a four to maybe a five or six?” or “What’s something we could work on over the next week to boost that confidence from a four to a five or so?” These types of open-ended questions actually get us to the last important component of effective conversations about behavior change: partnering and planning.



If your mentee is motivated to change, is using a lot of change talk, identifies the change as consistent with their own values, and expresses interest in changing, then it might be time to begin *planning*.

In the map analogy, planning is essentially picking the route to your destination: Are you going to take I-10 or Highway 59? Importantly, if your mentee is not motivated, is not using change talk, or doesn't see the change as consistent with their values, you shouldn't be planning. Remember to resist the righting reflex – the motivation for change must come from within your mentee. One of the most common mistakes mentors make is the “bait and switch.” This happens when the mentee expresses a small amount of change talk, and the mentor turns full steam ahead into the righting reflex, planning on behalf of their mentee. A mentor who motivates their mentee will be patient and evocative and will wait until the mentee expresses interest in making the change.

If your mentee does want to make a change, you might consider helping them set some “**SMART**” goals (see chapter 10 on goal setting for best practices in this area). However, there will be times when your mentee may not know how to get to

the goal that they want. A mentor should not underestimate their mentee's capacity to solve their own problems, but inevitably, if you mentor long enough, some mentees may want to change, but might not know how. This is where partnering comes into play.

Partnering is when a mentor guides their mentee toward a solution to their goal. It typically involves asking permission to share information. In the map analogy, partnering is asking permission to show some different routes to your mentee. This is different from advice giving, which is a righting reflex. Notice the difference between these two attempts to influence: 1) “You should start your homework when you get home, before you get on the Xbox,” versus 2) “Would you be interested in looking over some homework strategies with me?” The first is directing and is likely to reduce the mentee's motivation to change. The second emphasizes autonomy by asking permission to share information. This may seem like a very small difference, but it matters in conversations! With the second option, you are letting your mentee know: “It's your choice, not mine.” In fact, you might even follow up a question like number two with a statement that explicitly emphasizes autonomy: “Ultimately, it's up to you, Paco, you know what's important to you, and what you would like to see change, but the choice is yours. I'm happy to support you if you decide to do something different.”

Contextual Considerations in Having Conversations about Behavior Change

Although many supportive strategies that are designed to influence the behavior of young people rely on similar principles to that of MI (e.g., encouraging autonomy and providing verbal affirmations), there is limited research on using



MI with youth younger than 8 years old. Similarly, there is limited research on using this approach with youth who have intellectual disabilities or other developmental delays. While it is unlikely that approaching conversations in the ways outlined here would harm young people, currently, there is also no strong evidence that it will be particularly helpful for these youth.

It is also important for mentors to understand their role as a mentor, and not confuse it with professional mental health care providers, like psychologists, counselors, or therapists. Many issues that might come up in conversations between mentors and mentees might be better served by a professional service provider. You may also find yourself in many gray areas, where it's not clear whether a certain conversation is appropriate for you to take on with your mentee. In such cases, if you're in a program, supervision should be sought. For example, if your mentee mentions feeling sad or hopeless, or if your mentee indicates they may want to try drugs with their friends, reach out and connect with a supervisor.

Tips and Final Thoughts

In closing this chapter, there are a few things to remember. The process of MI is not a cure-all and isn't a way to trick your mentee to change. If you are trying to "Motivationally Interview" your mentee into behaviors or thoughts that are not consistent with their own values, you are not using MI — you are doing something else, and it probably isn't going to work. The righting reflex is a challenging personal barrier for mentors to overcome, and it takes practice. It will creep up when you least expect it, and it will sometimes show its nasty head without you noticing. If you feel it creeping up, take a step back and ask yourself: "Is the motivation for change coming from my mouth or my mentee's?"

and "What would the righting reflex look like right now?" Another helpful strategy for learning to be more accepting, compassionate, and evocative, is to have others who are more skilled in MI listen to recordings of you practicing. Role plays, in particular, are a risk-free way to get feedback on your approach, and to home in on a more accepting, evocative, compassionate, and curious approach to helping.

Additional Reading and Resources

The print title listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

- Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.