



# Motivational Interviewing for Mentors Toolkit

*A Guide for Programs Using the Materials*

## INTRODUCTION

Motivational interviewing (MI) is an evidence-based approach to having conversations about behavior change, and is designed to support individuals as they contemplate, plan for, and work toward positive changes in their behavior. This approach, originally developed for use in therapeutic and psychiatric services, is premised on the idea that meaningful behavior change must be driven by the intrinsic motivation an individual has to change their behavior in a positive way. As we all know, it can be very challenging make lifestyle changes when we are ambivalent (i.e. experiencing competing motivations for and against change) – anyone who has struggled to stop smoking, avoid negative peer relationships, or stop procrastinating on a looming work deadline knows how hard it can be to break free from the thought patterns or ambivalent feelings that hold us back from taking positive action. Thus, MI offers an approach to having conversations by which a caring person in someone’s life, such as a mentor, can help them understand *why* they would want to make a change in their behavior, and connect with their own motivations and goals in a way that leads them to move forward.

There is considerable research on the effectiveness of motivational interviewing, with several innovative studies highlighting the effectiveness of this approach within educational<sup>1,2</sup> and youth mentoring contexts.<sup>3,4</sup> For this resource, MENTOR has partnered with some of the leading scholars at the YESS Lab at the University of South Carolina who have pioneered the use of MI in youth mentoring programs. Our goal with this toolkit is to provide mentoring programs, and mentors themselves, with a suite of free and accessible tools they can use to integrate MI principles into their work with young people. Obviously, the mentoring relationships your program creates will be about a lot more than just behavior change, but we believe that MI can be a powerful tool within a mentoring context to support young people when they are contemplating making positive changes in their lives.

## ABOUT MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING

The online course and videos provided in this toolkit can teach mentors and program staff about the core principles and style of motivational interviewing and allow them to see how MI can be applied within the context of a caring adult-youth mentoring relationship (rather than a clinical or therapeutic relationship). Talking about behavior change is one of the more challenging tasks that a youth’s mentor might face – dancing delicately around the topic might be ineffective in getting the young person to follow



through on change, whereas pushing too hard for change might cause the young person to resist change even more, or even feel hurt, judged, or shamed. These conversations are a frequent source of strife and disconnect in mentoring relationships and can cause serious damage to the trust and rapport the mentor and youth have built over time.

The motivational interviewing style, when done well and with attention to detail, offers a way to have these conversations while avoiding conflict and strife, while also promoting an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion. That does not mean that MI will always lead to the result that mentors want – the young person may still struggle to change even if these conversations go well. But at the very least, these strategies will help mentors navigate these conversations in ways that don't damage the relationship and allow that young person to feel seen, heard, and valued, no matter the outcome. If there is one overarching goal of these materials, it is to help mentors to avoid what is known as “the righting reflex,” also called the “fixing reflex”—the tendency of caring adults to want to “fix” or “correct” what they see as negative behaviors, often through well-intentioned statements or actions that research shows can be harmful. You'll learn more about specific righting reflexes in the course, but anyone who has had someone shame, coerce, threaten, or pressure them into change knows how bad it can feel to be on the receiving end of a righting reflex. That is what these materials can help mentors avoid.

**Throughout your time using these materials it is important to remember that:**

- MI does not force or coerce a young person to change; rather, it helps that young person tap into their own values and desires for change in an authentic way.
- The style of MI is characterized by specific attention to how questions, reflections, affirmations and summaries are used to help people change. Researchers find that helpers (like mentors) who more consistently approach conversations using this style are more likely to help others make behavior changes.
- A mentoring relationship must always be about much more than just behavior change. Mentoring relationships are designed to be supportive, affirming, and enjoyable – an overemphasis on behavior change can lead to the relationship feeling punitive or even discouraging. While much of the style of MI reflects generally helpful conversational skills (e.g. active listening, nonjudgemental), a good mentor will have conversations about behavior change sparingly.



## WHEN TO APPLY MI IN MENTORING PROGRAMS

As noted previously, mentoring relationships, and mentoring programs generally, are rarely *only* about behavior change. Mentoring is about building meaningful connections, getting support in pursuing goals, learning new skills, exploring identity, providing a sense of belonging, and bringing joy and hope to the life of a young person. Within that broader context, there may be times when a young person considers changing how they act related to a problem or challenge they are experiencing. Those are the times when the MI style can be especially valuable. But it should never define the relationship or comprise the bulk of the activities a mentor and young person engage in.

While MI can be helpful to mentors in a wide variety of programs, it might be most helpful in programs where there is an emphasis on outcomes that might result from behavioral change (e.g., increasing school attendance, avoiding recidivism and further juvenile justice involvement, reducing drug and alcohol misuse). It might also be particularly helpful in programs where there is an emphasis on support around a transition the youth is making, such as getting their first job, applying to higher education, or exiting foster care. Those transition points can represent places where a young person might struggle to make changes or take action in a meaningful direction, and MI might be a helpful tool in helping that young person find the motivation to persevere through their time of transition.



## HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT IN YOUR PROGRAM

This toolkit has several components that will help your staff and mentors learn about motivational interviewing and how to apply it in mentoring contexts. We have provided:

- A [core training module](#) that allows any user to learn the basic concepts of MI and think about how they can apply them as a mentor. This online module is free to use and can serve as a stand-alone resource that provides an initial grounding in MI principles and approaches. Most users can get through the training in 1-2 hours of self-paced learning and reflection.
- [Refresher videos](#) that can be used to supplement the online module or be used during in-person mentor training. These videos each highlight a core aspect of the MI approach and provide examples of mentors using these skills in fictionalized mentoring scenarios. These videos, which average around 5-7 minutes in length, may be particularly valuable to mentors as they start using MI with their mentee, especially if a long period of time has passed since their initial training where they first learned about MI. Think of these videos as helpful refreshers that can help mentors deploy MI strategies with faithfulness to the core concepts.<sup>5</sup>

- A [full training video](#), about 45 minutes in length, in which staff from the YESS Lab walk trainees through the core MI principles and concepts. This video might be helpful in a live group training in which your staff introduces the concept of MI, plays sections of the video, and answers questions or provides role playing scenarios in between sections.

Together, these ready-to-use materials provide your staff and mentors with a basic understanding of MI and how to bring these concepts into their work with young people. It will be important to supplement these materials with opportunities to role play this conversational style or to get support from your staff on how to use MI around a specific challenge or change opportunity their mentee is experiencing. These resources are designed to strengthen mentor practice, but not to replace any support or care that your program provides to young people.

Programs will need to decide how to use these materials within the context of their existing training and onboarding for mentors. Some programs may wish to integrate this content into their pre-match training, having staff members do some teaching around these topics using the materials provided here. Others may have it as an additional training activity, where mentors go through the self-paced online module on their own in addition to their in-person training and orientation. Other programs may choose to treat MI as an *ongoing* or *post-match* training topic, asking mentors to learn about this approach after they have bonded and built trust with their mentee – usually the time when topics related to behavior change start to emerge and there is openness to the conversation.



There is no right or wrong way to use the materials provided here, but we ask that mentoring programs think carefully about when and how they ask mentors to engage in conversations about behavior change with mentees. Remember, the worst outcome here is that your mentors apply pressure to young people who are not ready for or open to those conversations – that can sour the mentoring experience and even lead to prematurely closed relationships if the young people find these conversations upsetting or unhelpful. Work to avoid that outcome by thinking carefully about how MI can be most effectively taught and used within the context of your program.

We also encourage programs to consider how they can provide role play opportunities or mock scenarios that will allow mentors to try out these MI skills in a safe environment before using them directly with a young person. The concepts of MI are easy to learn and understand, but they are hard to remember and use consistently in a conversation. Even experienced professionals need to practice their MI skills to use them consistently. Encourage your mentors to practice using MI skills in the types of scenarios that are likely to come up in your program – ongoing training sessions are a perfect opportunity to throw some scenarios at your mentors and see how they do in applying MI in a real conversation.

Lastly, we reiterate that these materials are designed to complement and enhance the work of mentors and your program will still need to provide all of the match preparation, supervision, and support that you typically offer. While MI may help mentors have some difficult conversations with their mentee, they may still encounter challenges, or even crisis moments, in which they will need the supervision and support of your program staff.

These MI skills are a helpful asset to a mentor, but are not designed for every situation or circumstance, so plan on still providing the support you typically offer as mentors and youth work through these conversations together.

## FINAL TIPS FOR USING MI EFFECTIVELY IN YOUR PROGRAM

Because using MI within mentoring relationships carries some risk if the conversations do not go well, we encourage mentoring programs to consider the following as they put these materials to use:

- Make sure that someone on the program staff has a thorough understanding of the Motivational Interviewing style and strategies presented in this toolkit before you ask your mentors to try this out with young people. Someone on your staff will need to provide training, facilitate practice role plays and MI skill building exercises, and provide support and guidance as mentors integrate these techniques into their conversations with mentees. Ensure you can provide that support to mentors and that at least one staff member takes on the role of MI “expert” that others can learn from. See below for additional sources of MI learning for staff members who want to take on that role.
- Reiterate to your mentors that MI will be a small, but potentially meaningful, aspect of their mentoring relationship. Make it clear to them that having conversations about behavior change is just one skill that they should have in their mentoring “toolbox” and that it’s one that should be used somewhat rarely and with caution. Note the harm that can happen if they don’t adhere to the principles of MI or, worst of all, lapse into those “righting reflexes” in these change conversations with their mentee. Encourage them to build caring, supportive, and enjoyable relationships with youth, delving into behavior change talk sparingly and when the young person seems open to the conversation.
- Similarly, avoid having behavior change define your mentoring program’s approach or goals. While we would all like to see every young person overcome challenges and make meaningful behavioral changes where needed, the reality is that change can be hard and can have many fits and starts along the way. Change is a process and a journey, and a good mentoring program will walk that path with a young person, while also making room for many other meaningful moments, activities, events, and conversations. Let your young people know that they are valued and loved, even when they have things to work on or changes they should likely consider. Don’t let that adult-driven desire to push change subvert the care and love that your program can provide.



## ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF LEARNING ABOUT MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING

- Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2023). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change and grow* (4th ed.). The Guilford Press.
- Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT) website - <https://motivationalinterviewing.org/>
- Motivational Interviewing Resources by Case Western Reserve University - <https://case.edu/socialwork/centerforebp/practices/motivational-interviewing/motivational-interviewing-resources>
- Talking About Behavior Change (Chapter from *Becoming a Better Mentor*), by Dr. Sam McQuillin. Published by MENTOR - <https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/BBM-Chapter-11.pdf>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Strait, G., McQuillin, S., Smith, B. (2012). Randomized trial of motivational in-terviewing to improve students' academic performance. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 40(8), 1032-1039.
- 2 Herman, K. C., Reinke, W. M., & Frey, A. J. (2021). *Motivational interviewing in schools: Strategies for engaging parents, teachers, and students* (2nd ed.). Springer Publishing Company.
- 3 McQuillin, S.D. & Lyons, M.D. (2016). Brief instrumental school-based mentoring for middle school students: theory and impact. *Adv. Sch. Ment. Health Promot.* **9**: 73-89.
- 4 McQuillin, S.D. and McDaniel, H.L. (2021), Pilot randomized trial of brief school-based mentoring for middle school students with elevated disruptive behavior. *Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci.*, 1483: 127-141. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nyas.14334>
- 5 Hart, M. J., McQuillin, S. D., Iachini, A., Cooper, D. K., & Weist, M. D. (2025). The efficacy and usability of motivational interviewing just-in-time trainings for youth mentors. *American journal of community psychology*, 76(1-2), 121-132. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12804>