

# Using Motivational Interviewing to Help Your Students

*by Lisa A. Sheldon*

**M**y goal as a teacher is to facilitate student learning, encourage academic momentum, and promote goal attainment while teaching about human nutrition. On many occasions, though, there have been opportunities for students to learn life and career lessons far removed from my nutrition curriculum. The key to developing this other kind of learning has been within the framework provided by motivational interviewing.

Motivational interviewing, which began as a counseling technique in addiction recovery, is a client-centered tool for making changes, increasing helpful behaviors and decreasing unhelpful behaviors.<sup>1</sup> It relies on an individual's intrinsic motivation and interest in change, using a non-confrontational approach to frame goals in a practical, attainable fashion.<sup>2</sup> Teachers who use motivational interviewing enhance their listening and problem-solving skills to become more effective communicators and as a result create better rapport with students.<sup>3</sup>

In my experiences, what separates successful students from the less successful is their ability to navigate obstacles and maintain motivation toward their goals. Getting “derailed” is a common problem for many college students, either in individual courses, for a semester, or even longer. For some of these students, a professor who can guide them toward their goal, despite unforeseen obstacles, is the key to success. Motivational interviewing is an invaluable tool toward this end.

The essence of motivational interviewing is captured by the two acronyms OARS (open-ended questions, affirmations, reflective listening, summary statements) and FRAMES (feedback, responsibility, advice, menu, empathy, self-efficacy). Here are examples:

Open-ended questions are those questions that cannot be answered with a yes or no. They allow the student to “tell his/her story” and provide

you with information about the student as a learner, how best to meet his/her needs or about the issue of concern. For example:

“Tell me more about \_\_\_\_.”

“What happened next?”

Affirmations are useful for strengthening the professor-student relationship. Sincerity and careful judgment in the use of affirmations shows your interest and concern, while disingenuous or trite comments can erode the relationship and create negativity. These morale-boosting statements can help build confidence and increase feelings of empowerment in students, and they can also be used to encourage specific behaviors and recognize students’ hard work. For example:

“You did very well on the last exam.”

“I noticed that you arrived to class on time, I appreciate that.”

Reflective listening enables students to hear their comments aloud though another person’s voice. It shows that you are listening and understanding what the student is telling you. This tool can draw attention to inconsistencies in behavior and goals without judgment. Varying your technique can keep your conversation more interesting and less programmed. Some examples:

“It sounds like you want to create new study habits, but you don’t know where to start.”

“If I am hearing you correctly, you prepared for the exam by reading the chapter notes, but that was not enough.”



“Earlier you said that you were completely prepared for the exam, but it sounds like there might have been some additional steps you might have taken.”

Summary statements bring the conversation to a conclusion. They need not be elaborate and you can start by simply saying that you want to summarize the conversation. For the student, it is chance to correct things and provide additional information. The statements can also be a reminder of action that needs to be taken. An example:

“So, today we discussed some possible solutions to get you to class on-time, and learned that you want to take action to help solve the problem.”

Start by using one or two of the OARS components and expand your repertoire to include all four techniques. Knowing which tools will be most effective at any moment requires practice and careful listening.

Using the FRAMES (feedback, responsibility, advice, menu, empathy, self-efficacy) construction, teachers, advisors and others can help students take action and move forward. One of the tenets of motivational interviewing is to engage with positive momentum. Stay focused on moving forward to prevent getting stuck on issues in the past or stuck in thinking that is counter-productive.

Feedback must be delivered in a clear, non-judgmental way that articulates discrepancies in the current behavior and the goal or new behavior. These are best stated as facts rather than opinions, which might be dismissed as “just an opinion.”

Responsibility links the problematic behavior with the action of the individual. It can be a clear reminder that the behavior is “owned” by the student and therefore, is up to the student to change if they choose to.

Advice can be used to provide alternatives to the undesirable behavior, to help negotiate challenging situations, or to build paths around an obstacles. But, like any advice, it is up to the individual to consider the advice and decide whether or not to take action. Avoid becoming emotionally invested in whether or not a student accepts your advice. Your role is to simply provide a new perspective or an option to consider.

Menus offer more than one solution to a problem and allow the individual to choose the path that will potentially be the most effective and helpful for the current challenge. Do not discount any potential solution as unworkable; it is up to the student to make that judgment.

Empathy allows you to build rapport by acknowledging that change can take effort and work, although this is not the case for all individuals, so it must be used with caution and sincerity.

Self-efficacy increases the likelihood that the individual will feel empowered and capable of making a change and following through with a new behavior long-term. Express your belief that the individual has the

potential to be successful and that he or she has your support. Support is good; cheerleading is often seen as overkill. Words of encouragement can be very helpful, as are words of praise, when used with care.

Here are some specific examples of motivational interviewing, taken from conversations I've had with my students.

#### SAMPLE DIALOGUE 1:

When a student was upset about her performance on a recent test, we had this discussion:

PROF: "You seem upset by your exam performance."

STUDENT: "Yes, I can't believe how poorly I did."

PROF: "Let's see if together we can find some ways to help you to do better on the next exam. Tell me about how you prepared."

STUDENT: "I read the chapter and looked at my notes."

PROF: "Okay, so you prepared using the text and your notes. Have you thought about trying some other study techniques?"

STUDENT: "Yeah, I could try using flash cards for the vocabulary. I used to study with my friends and we would quiz each other. That helped a lot in my anatomy class."

PROF: "Flash cards, studying with your friends, reading the text and reviewing your notes—that's a nice list of options. What will you try for next time?"

STUDENT: "Maybe I'll still read the chapter and review notes, but make the flashcards and see if my friends want to study together."

PROF: "Okay, You've put together a solid plan that you are very capable of doing. Let's see how it works out for the next exam and we can talk again."

#### SAMPLE DIALOGUE 2:

Here is the exchange with a student who was arriving to class ten minutes late each day, disrupting other students and underperforming:

PROF: "When you arrive late to class, it disrupts other students who trying to learn. And, I think you miss some of the important parts of the class which affects your ability to do well. Earlier in the semester you were arriving on time, what has changed?"

STUDENT: "Yeah, sorry about that. I stayed up late, and then this morning I overslept and missed the bus."

PROF: "That situation does present some challenges, let's work out a solution to get you to class on-time and ready to learn. What do you think about that?"

STUDENT: "Okay, I know I just need to get up earlier. Then I can make the bus."

PROF: "So, what steps do you need to take? How can you make it happen?"

STUDENT: “I can make sure the alarm is set a little earlier and probably, I need to get more rest so I am not so tired, but I like to stay up late. Maybe I could take a nap during the afternoon. Next time I won’t sign up for such an early class.”

PROF: “Sounds like morning classes are going to be a challenge for you, but since you are already enrolled in my morning class, how do you feel about getting up earlier or getting more rest?”

STUDENT: “It might work, but I’d have to give up some of my personal time. I’ll try setting the alarm earlier.”

PROF: “It looks like you have come up with a plan to get to class on time. I look forward to seeing you on time next class.”

### SAMPLE DIALOGUE 3:

This discussion centers on a student who was repeatedly arriving to class unprepared to learn and contribute to the class community:

PROF: “Being prepared for class is critical for you to gain a complete understanding of the material and for you to be a contributing member of class. I am concerned that you might not be taking as active a role as you might if you were fully prepared.”

STUDENT: “I didn’t have time to complete the reading because I had to work a double shift.”


PROF: “I understand how that work schedule could interfere with your school work and make class preparation challenging. How do you think it can be negotiated in the future?”

STUDENT: “I could do the reading during my breaks and dinner hour.”

PROF: “That sounds like a workable solution. Are you willing to try that solution for this coming week? I’ll follow-up with you next week to see how the idea worked out.”

Keep in mind that resistance is normal, and events, tasks, and challenges sometimes provoke opposition to change. The motivational interviewing approach would suggest that it is fine to acknowledge reluctance to change, but avoid confronting it head-on as this only feeds resistance and deepens resolve that the resistance is the root of the problem, not the behavior itself. Motivational interviewing places responsibility for educational success in the hands of students. At the same time, the frameworks increase opportunities to communicate with students about what they can do to be successful, and let them know that they have opportunities in every educational setting to practice the skills that can bring about success.

Interactions with students can become more focused and helpful not only to the student but also for the professor. Motivational interviewing can increase student competency as students take steps that help them to real-

ize both short- and long-term goals for learning, careers, and life. Motivational interviewing has deepened my understanding of challenges facing my students, helped me develop stronger communication skills, and better equipped me to motivate and guide students. Carefully guided discussions can help to move a student from a place of frustration and academic despair to one of hope and encouragement. What may be most helpful for students is the opportunity to discuss an issue with someone who is really engaged and listening. Despite busy schedules of teaching and research, this is a gift we can give our students which is not soon forgotten. 

## ENDNOTES

Note: To learn more about motivational interviewing, visit [www.motivationalinterview.org](http://www.motivationalinterview.org) and the American Academy of Family Physicians: [www.aafp.org/afp/20000301/1409.html](http://www.aafp.org/afp/20000301/1409.html).

1. Miller and Rose. "Toward a Theory of Motivational Interviewing." *The American Psychologist*.
2. Ibid.
3. Atkinson. "Motivational Interviewing Strategies for Disaffected Secondary School Students: A Case Example."
4. Ibid and Rosengren. *Building Motivational Interviewing Skills, A Practitioner Workbook*.

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