

switchboard

Motivational Interviewing for Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) Service Providers

April 15, 2026





Today's Speaker



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Training Officer, Switchboard



Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, you will be able to...

Describe

the guiding spirit and principles of Motivational Interviewing (MI) and how they can support client-centered conversations with Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs)

01

Recognize

how MI complements trauma-informed, strengths-based service delivery in URM programs

02

Apply

MI principles to support URMs in overcoming ambivalence and aligning choices with their independent living goals

03



Describe

the guiding spirit and principles of Motivational Interviewing (MI) and how they can support client-centered conversations with Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URMs)

01

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04



In your conversations with youth, what moments feel challenging, make you unsure what to say next, or make it harder to stay client-centered?

Client-Centered Case Management

- Focuses on assessing client **needs, goals, and uniqueness**
- Honors and respects **autonomy**
- Emphasizes **choice** and **control**
- **Engages** client rather than prescribes
- **Avoids** conversational barriers that may increase resistance or shutdown





Conversational Barriers to Avoid

Confronting

Persuading

Labeling

Interrupting

Ordering

Judging

**Over-
identifying**

Pressuring

Criticizing

**Giving
unsolicited
advice**

**Making
false
promises**

Patronizing

Shaming

Scolding



The Guiding Spirit of MI

01

Partnership

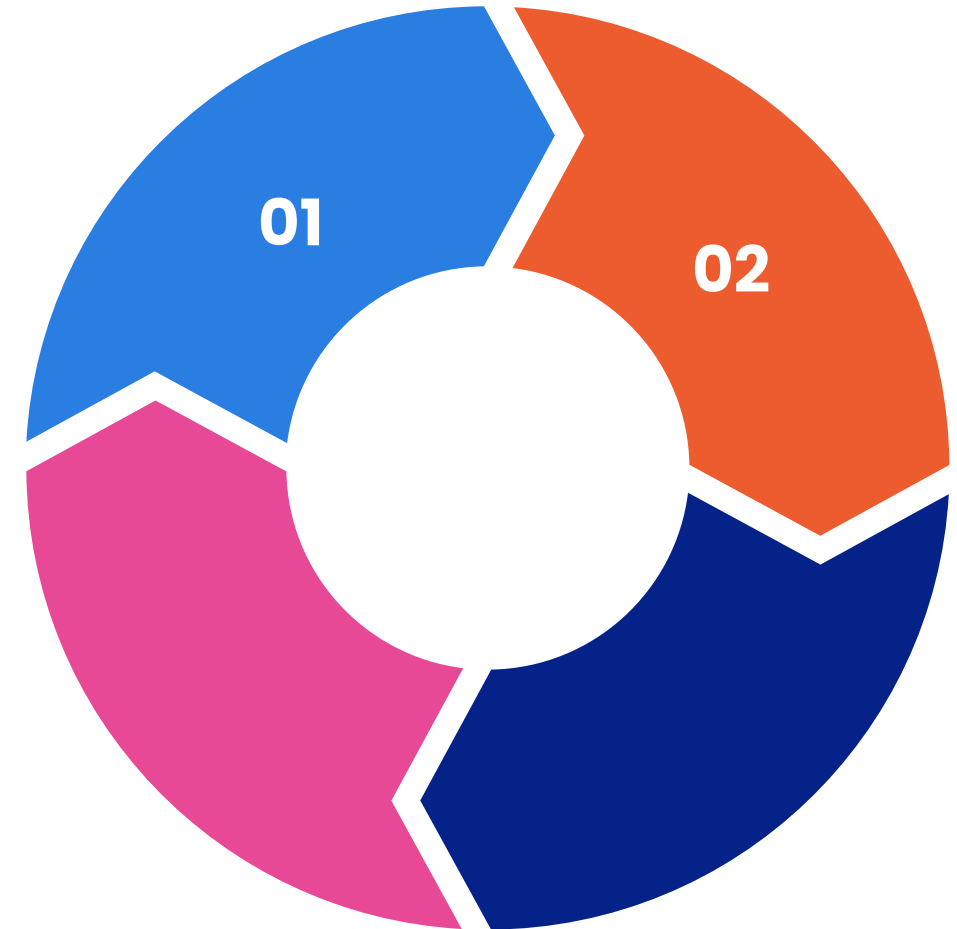
Walks alongside youth, not ahead of them

02

Acceptance

Conveys nonjudgmental understanding through four practices:

- Absolute worth
- Accurate empathy
- Autonomy support
- Affirmation





The Guiding Spirit of MI

01

Partnership

Walks alongside youth, not ahead of them

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Conveys nonjudgmental understanding

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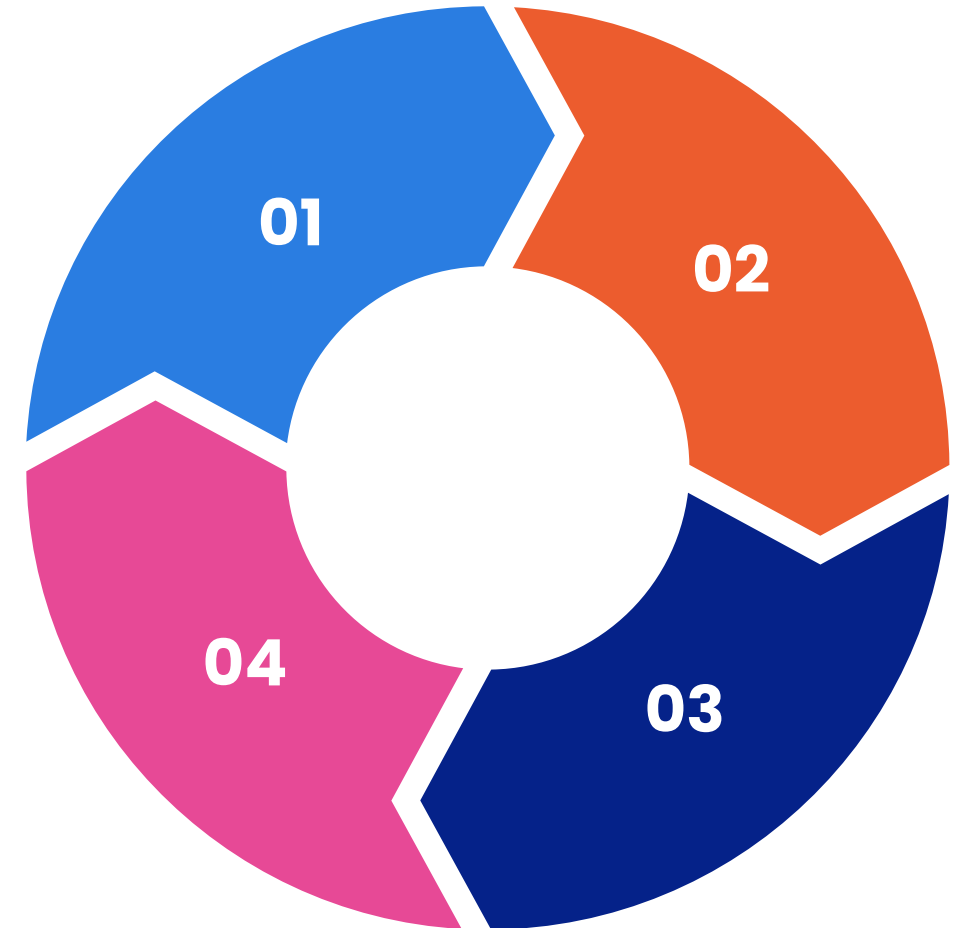
Compassion

Prioritizes youth's well-being

04

Empowerment

Supports clients to utilize their strengths and autonomy





The Guiding Spirit of MI

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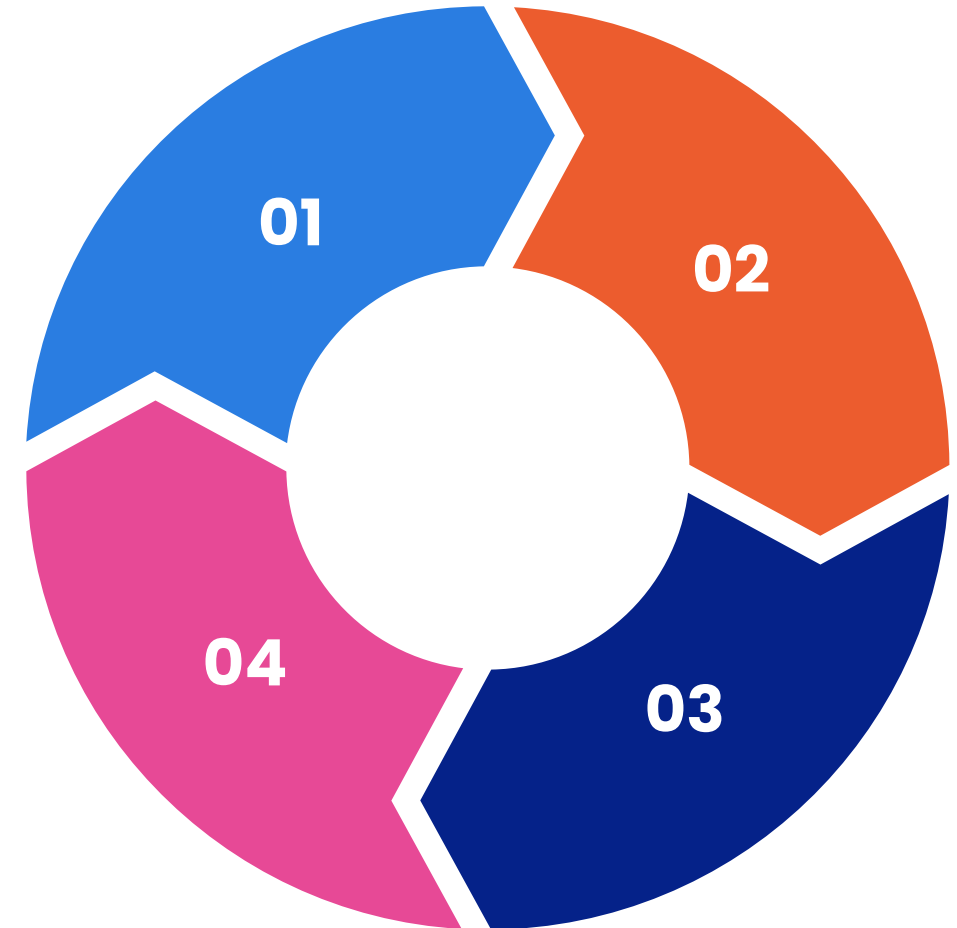
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Prioritizes youth's well-being

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Empowerment

Supports clients to utilize their strengths and autonomy



Motivational Interviewing (MI)

- An **evidence-based** method to support **change** and **growth**
- A **client-centered** approach used to explore and **resolve ambivalence**
- A way to help people feel **heard, empowered,** and **in control** of their own decisions
- A **communication** style grounded in **empathy** and **collaboration**





Defining and Understanding Ambivalence

- **Holding mixed or conflicting feelings** about a choice or change (e.g., wanting independence but fearing failure)
- Ambivalence is a signal; it's **normal** and **expected**—not a sign of resistance
- **MI accepts ambivalence** and helps youth resolve it



Motivational Interviewing is Not:



**A way to trick or
manipulate youth**



**A specific therapeutic
model or intervention**



**Always easy to learn or
use or a quick fix**



**A guarantee of change or
a solution to everything**



**Your role is to be a *guide*,
not an expert.**

Active Listening

OARS Framework

O

Open-ended questions

A

Affirmations

R

Reflections

S

Summaries





How might you want a youth to feel during conversations with you?

Active Listening (OARS)

Open-ended Questions



"I want to graduate and get a job, but sometimes I skip school. I feel like no one really gets me here."

Responses:

"What would graduating mean to you?"

"How do you feel when you go to school now?"

"What's been happening to make you feel like no one really gets you at school?"



Active Listening (OARS)

Affirmations



"I signed up for a career fair after school next week."

Responses:

"That shows initiative—you took a step toward your goals."

"You're putting yourself out there, and that takes courage."



Active Listening (OARS)

Reflections



"I keep getting in trouble at the group home for dumb stuff—like not coming back right at curfew. The other guys there always lie and say I'm mean to them. They treat me like I'm a little kid. I don't think I can stay there much longer."

Responses:

Repeat (simple): *"You're getting in trouble and feel like others aren't being honest."*

Rephrase: *"The rules feel strict and you're frustrated with how you're being treated—and that's making it hard to stay."*

Paraphrase (complex): *"You're trying to manage a tough situation where you feel misunderstood by staff and blamed by others. It's wearing you down, and you're not sure how much longer you can take it."*



Active Listening (OARS)

Summaries



"Lately I've been smoking more—it just helps me stop thinking about everything. I know it's not great, but it calms me down. I haven't been sleeping much or showing up to school, and I keep getting in trouble with staff."

Response:

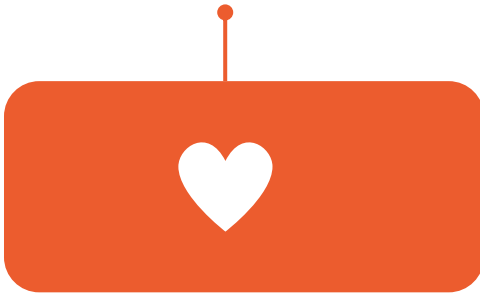
"So far, I've heard that you've been feeling overwhelmed, and smoking helps you cope, even if you're not proud of it. You haven't been sleeping or going to school much, and that's caused tension at home. You're trying to manage a lot, and even though things are tough, you're still willing to talk about it."



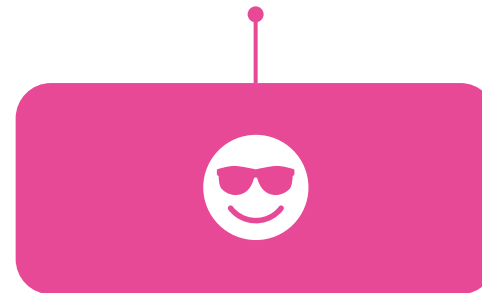


The Guiding Principles of MI

**EXPRESS
EMPATHY**



**ROLL WITH
RESISTANCE**



**DEVELOP
DISCREPANCY**



**SUPPORT
SELF-EFFICACY**





How might the guiding spirit and principles of MI help you keep conversations with youth client-centered?



Recognize

how MI complements trauma-informed, strengths-based service delivery in URM programs

01

02

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Based on what you've learned so far, where do you already see alignment between MI and trauma-informed care and strengths-based approaches?



The Slido app must be installed on every computer you're presenting from

Trauma-Informed Approach

- Considers trauma's **physical, emotional,** and **spiritual** impacts
- Identifies trauma signs in **behavior, relationships,** and **dynamics**
- Forms **positive, restorative relationships**
- Prioritizes **safety** and **trust**
- Embraces a **holistic** client approach
- Minimizes trauma **triggers**





Benefits of a Trauma-Informed Approach



Improves client engagement in services and outcomes

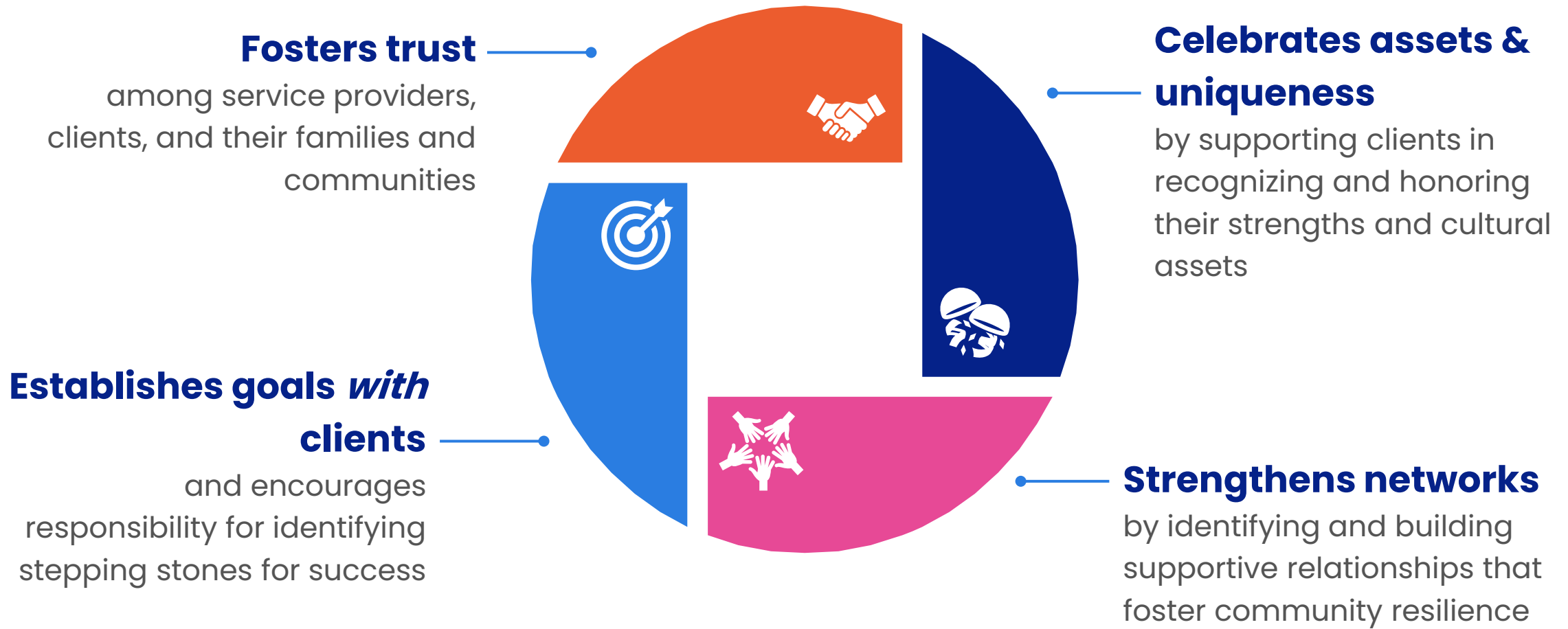


Fosters safe environments for clients and service providers



Improves staff wellness and reduces burnout

Using a Strengths-Based Approach





How might MI complement your trauma-informed and strengths-based service delivery with URM's?



Bringing It All Together

MI complements trauma-informed and strengths-based URM service delivery by:



Ensuring support for youth who may not voluntarily seek it out



Building trust, especially with youth impacted by trauma and displacement



Increasing engagement of youth who feel ambivalent about change



Encouraging cross-cultural sensitivities and autonomy



Reducing incongruence between agency goals and youth values



Building resilience and internal motivation



What might you notice in yourself or in URM clients that would signal it could be helpful to pause and use MI?

Connecting MI to URM Service Delivery

Before Responding, Pause and Ask:

- What am I noticing—in myself or in the youth?
- Where might ambivalence be showing up?
- What values or goals could be underneath this behavior?
- Which part of the Spirit of MI is most needed right now?
- What would an OARS response sound like?

Common Scenarios with Youth Where MI May Be Helpful:

- Language barriers and feeling unwelcome at school
- Substance use impacting daily decisions
- Pressure to financially support family while attending school
- Avoiding meetings, appointments, or delaying getting a driver's license
- Conflict with foster parents or group home rules





Apply

MI principles to support URM in overcoming ambivalence and aligning choices with their independent living goals

01

02

03

04



MI Recap

URM Significance

5

Builds trust, honors autonomy, supports youth-led goals, aligns with trauma-informed and strengths-based practices

What It's Not

4

Manipulative, an intervention, a quick fix, or guaranteed change

The Guiding Principles

3

Express empathy, develop discrepancy, roll with resistance, support self-efficacy

Active Listening

2

OARS Framework: **O**pen-ended questions, **A**ffirmations, **R**eflections, **S**ummaries

The Guiding Spirit

1

Partnership, acceptance, compassion, empowerment



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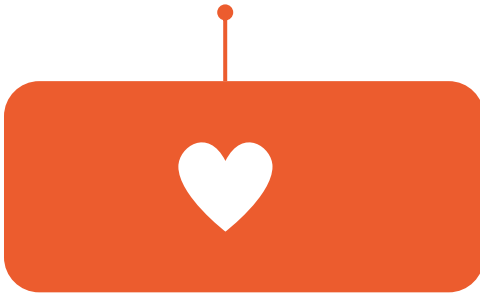
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Partnership, acceptance, compassion, empowerment

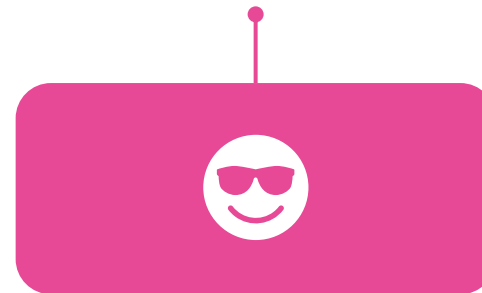


The Guiding Principles of MI

**EXPRESS
EMPATHY**



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The Guiding Principles of MI in Practice:

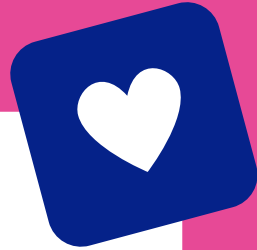
Meet Miguel

- **17-year-old** from **Guatemala**
- You are his caseworker and have been talking through his **independent living goals**— including **finishing school, finding work, and supporting his family**— and any barriers or challenges that may get in the way.





MI Principle: Express Empathy



Imagine you're meeting with Miguel to review his independent living goals. You ask how things are going with school and finding a job.

Miguel:

"I try to go to school, but I don't understand everything. Teachers talk fast. Sometimes I just don't want to go at all."



Which of these responses demonstrate expressing empathy? (select all)



Miguel:

"I want to be making my own money, helping my family, and living on my own with a car."



MI Principle: Develop Discrepancy

- ✓ ***How does your current spending fit with your goal of buying a car?***
- × *Why haven't you started saving yet?*



Miguel:

"I don't know. School just doesn't seem like it's working for me. I tried for a while, but I still don't understand the teacher and don't feel welcome. I just want to do what I know I'm good at—working."



MI Principle: Roll with Resistance

- ✓ ***It sounds like you really gave it a shot, and it's frustrating that you didn't see results. What's been the hardest part?***
- × *You're being irresponsible. I can't help if you won't help yourself. Why aren't you following through on your own goals?*



MI Principle: Support Self- Efficacy



Two weeks later, you meet again.
You're excited to hear that Miguel has
taken a step forward!

Miguel:

"Last week I went to school every day. I also talked with a classmate about the job fair. I know I missed the last one, but he said he would go to the next one with me. We asked our teacher, and the school is hosting one next week, so I will be back to the house later than usual next Wednesday."



What strengths-based affirmation could you offer Miguel here?

Reflecting on Miguel's Case Scenario

You've used the guiding spirit and principles of MI to:

- ✓ Build trust with Miguel
- ✓ Reflect his ambivalence
- ✓ Help him reconnect his day-to-day choices with his self-directed independent living goals
- ✓ Encourage his progress without pressure



Putting It All Together

When MI is used consistently, it supports:

- Youth-led decision-making
- Self-efficacy goals
- Trauma-informed and strengths-based relationships
- Service provider confidence and retention
- Reducing service providers' stress and workload (by not having to do everything for the client)





What's one takeaway from today you might apply to your service delivery?



Questions?

Type your question in the Q&A



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Recommended Resources

Switchboard

- **Blog:** [Listening for Change: Applying Motivational Interviewing to Support Refugee and Newcomer Goals](#) (2026)
- **Podcast:** [What is Motivational Interviewing?](#) (2019)
- **Guide:** [Strategies to Increase Newcomer Youth and Family Participation in Programs and Services](#) (2025)
- **Tip Sheet:** [Boosting Engagement: 10 Ways to Increase Newcomer Youth and Family Participation in Programs and Services](#) (2025)
- **Guide:** [Supporting Expectant and Parenting Newcomer Youth](#) (2025)
- **Webinar:** [How 360° VR Videos Are Transforming Refugee Resettlement](#) (2025) *Includes URM Secondary Ed Pathway Exploration Module
- **Webinar:** [Navigating Difficult Conversations with Clients](#) (2025)
- **Webinar:** [Child Protection Roundtable Session 3: Hear Foster Parent and Staff Perspectives](#) (2025)
- **Video:** [Adjusting to Life & Work in the U.S. – Perspectives from Refugee Youth](#) (2020)

The Guilford Press

- **Workbook:** [Building Motivational Interviewing Skills: A Practitioner Workbook](#)



Listening for Change: Applying Motivational Interviewing to Support Refugee and Newcomer Goals

January 22, 2026 • Switchboard

Are you a service provider working with refugees and newcomers who are ambivalent about change? This blog describes how you can transition from traditional "advice giving" to a more transformative client-centered approach through Motivational Interviewing, including practical tools you can start using today.

Stay Connected

✉ Switchboard@Rescue.org

🌐 www.SwitchboardTA.org

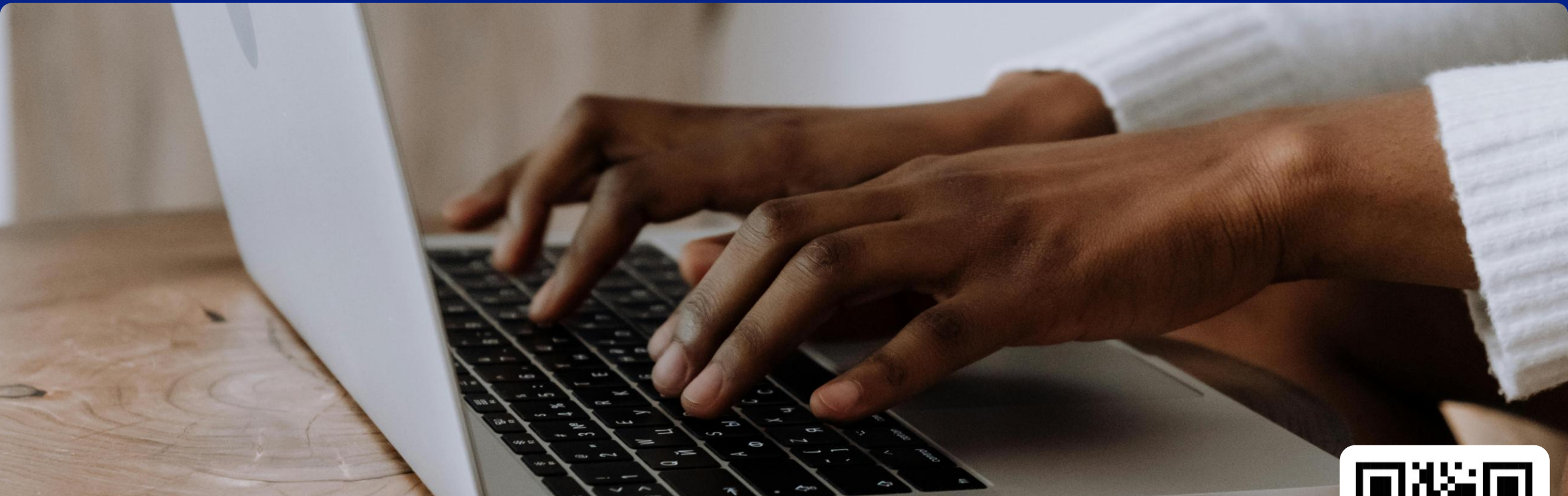


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