



Paul Burke Training Group

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Beyond training: Looking at learning MI in a whole new light!

Thoughts on Improved Practice (TIP) #1727



In many ways, providing evidence-based affirmations to our clients acts as the golden egg that opens up the spirit of M.I. (It might open up their spirit a little too!)

Affirming client strengths, useful skills, positive intentions, and desire for making the targeted change, is also a golden skill in hosting MI conversations. Same goes for affirming client statements of hope (for better things to come). Affirming statements on the part of the helper makes clients more aware of and focused on their ability to change – which is, yet again, nothing if not a golden egg! Increase the capacity for forward movement ***is the golden egg that eventually gives birth to the golden change!***

Still, many MI learners under-estimate the importance of this skill. I have a feeling that's because so many people confuse affirmation with being “nice” – or “positive”. Not that there's anything wrong with being nice, and positive with clients. (It certainly beats the alternative!). There's much more to the skill of selecting and then highlighting positive attributes than just helping the client to be aware of your respect for them. The fact is - recognizing what can/should be affirmed and learning how to construct a response that can be tied to the target behavior of an MI conversation is an important MI skill. To get good at it requires practice, and a dedication to give attention to process.

Are You Affirming- Enough?

Getting good at hosting MI conversations involves much more than developing solid technical skills. MI conversations only benefit from good technique when a respectful environment, or “a spirit for the process” can be created. There needs to be enough of it fill the air around you and your client as a motivational interview unfolds.

Affirming clients in the MI approach involves much more than simply pointing out evidence of client strength, skill, hard work, value, and capacity for change. True, it involves all of that, but it also involves nurturing a habit of actively seeking out and searching for such evidence – with at least as much gusto as Sherlock Holmes would show when using his magnifying glass to search for clues in a really tough case.

Being “affirming” as part of creating a space for MI conversation is an intentional, planned way of being. It is reflected in the helper who works hard to “catch the client doing something good” (or doing something well, or thinking something helpful, or having a desire to move in the direction of the target behavior).



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Learning to find ways to promote the affirmative is the fourth of the ingredients of “Acceptance” - a key component of the Spirit of MI. (You may recall that Acceptance is the “A” in the PACE acronym that represents the MI Spirit: Partnership, Aceptance, Compassion, and Evocation). While affirmation is the last of four ingredients that serve to create an “accepting spirit” in MI helpers (in addition to Absolute Worth, Accurate Empathy, and “Autonomy Support”) – it is certainly not least.



Based on my own clinical experience with MI, I am firmly convinced that having an affirming attitude is the most fundamental of all the habits that work together to form the Spirit that drives MI. Here’s why:

1. *Many (most?) of our clients live in a world that chronically focuses on what is “wrong” with them.* Very few assessment interviews and even fewer assessment instruments serve to snoop out what is “right” with people. *Most are focused on deficit.* Most are designed to find out what is broken so that the helper can design an intervention that, when installed, will bring a “fix” to the client (often, whether the client wants it or not!).
2. *Many (most?) of our clients live in a world that is shy about providing positive feedback and kind, supportive, and encouraging words.* Many come from homes and families where “negative words” and judgment are more common than evidence-based affirmation of the “good stuff” that lives inside the minds, and bodies, and hearts of everyone who tries for a future that might be better than their past.
3. *Many (most?) of our clients have never learned to self-validate and self-affirm their own positive and worthwhile attributes.* Most of the clients I have worked with discover their need to learn how to spot evidence of competency and value in themselves. “It don’t come natural” as Tom Sawyer used to say. It runs very, very deep. If we could teach them nothing else, teaching them how to recognize and value the real strengths and attributes they possess would go a long way toward helping our client to enhance their inner motivations for change.
4. *Many (all?) of our clients are more inclined to engage in conversations when they know that we have a keen eye and an unusual habit of finding what is best inside their intentions, hopes, and thoughts.*



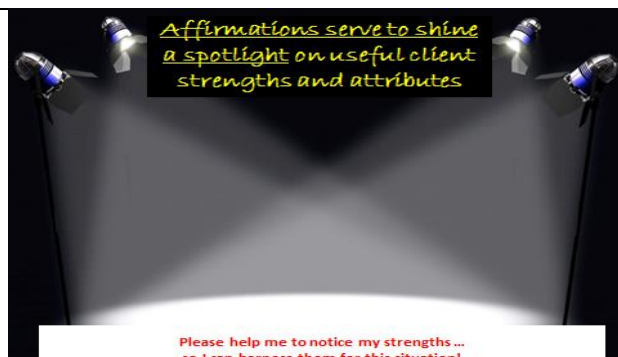
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Genuine affirmations serve to help clients recognize evidence of their own self-efficacy. Well-constructed affirmations shine a spotlight on helpful and useful traits that the client could apply to the change process to assist in moving toward the target.

Many MI clients come to us with a social biography that has not included much genuine affirmation. Everyone can learn to shift their focus to what is positive and true about themselves.



THREE CASE EXAMPLES:

<p>Client: “I am so sick and tired of everybody telling me what to do. Now I have to come in here and listen to another “helping professional” help me by telling me what to do! Well, the fact is, I’ll decide what I’m going to do, and I’ll decide if I’m going to do it, and I’ll decide when I’m going to do it – or not! I don’t see why everybody thinks that they have the right to an opinion about my life!</p>	<p>Helper: “Wow, Mike, I can see that you’ve about had enough of being “helped” in the way that help has been happening for you in the past! I must say though, even though it may sound a little strange, I wish more of my clients were like you. One thing that I really respect in a person is when they decide to take responsibility for their own lives, and their own decisions, and to take their power back. You’re clear about who is going to be the boss in your case plan. Too many people just give that away and I respect the fact that you haven’t. Good for you!</p>
<p>Client: My daughter told me that the only choice I have now is to take pills to get my cholesterol down. I’m not so crazy about that idea. Even my doctor says that I should start on those statin drugs or whatever they are. But I’m not so sure. I went online last night and there was this page that said that if you take a lot of fiber and a lot of oat bran and stuff and if you take certain vitamins and watch your fat intake, you might not have to take pills. I have to think about it.</p>	<p>Helper: Well, I know there are a number of ways to impact cholesterol levels, but I have to say, I really admire your willingness to do some research on this. We know that people who achieve good success with health goals are those who are willing to do a little homework and read up on this stuff. The internet is sometimes a good place to start with personal health research and there are other good sources too that I could offer. Overall though, I gotta say - the fact that you’re willing to invest time and effort in looking onto your options is a really positive trait.</p>
<p>CLIENT: I got kicked out of my new apartment last week because I let this old friend move in with me last week. I told him he could only stay for a week,</p>	<p>HELPER: Well, sometimes making the best decision for ourselves is hard –especially when we see our friends having a hard time – and when we think we can lend a hand to someone in need. It’s really amazing to me, Ken, how even</p>



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but that homeless agency policy says “no overnight guests”. I also bought him a case of beer. He got kind of carried away and the landlord had to come down and see what was going on. My worker says I shouldn’t have done it, but I just couldn’t help it. I mean – he was having the shakes really bad. And he was puking. I mean – he was in withdrawal real bad. He really made a mess of the place.

when you know that your housing is at risk, you still have a heart of gold and you are driven by a desire to help. Not everyone in your shoes would be willing to be so compassionate and that is a real virtue in this day and age. Once we figure out a way to get you back on track with housing, we could maybe talk a bit about how to help you find a good balance between compassion for others and compassion with yourself – so that everybody can get their needs met, including yourself. But for now, I want to say, I can sure see how the helping spirit is still very much alive in you despite your own challenges these days.



This week, you’re invited to give your attention to the many, many opportunity sightings that come along in every conversation to spotlight client strength and capacity. They’ll show up in every conversation you have with clients. (I promise!) Help your clients to recognize what they have, and who they are, and how they can adapt their capabilities for use in their current desire for change. Is there anything in what your client is saying, or implying, or is there anything in their behavior or pattern that could be congratulated, applauded, or at least respected and recognized? If so – as Nike says ... “just do it”!

Be sure to point out the “evidence” that you are using to justify what you’re going to affirm. Supplying the evidence-base for affirmations makes them believable to the client. For clients who have had little experience at hearing positive, supportive recognition, believability is essential in helping them accept that they have self-efficacy. Affirmations, above all else, are an evidence-based practice.

Skill Testing Question! Affirmation is one of the four “A’s” of “Acceptance” (which is one of the main domains within MI Spirit). Can you name the other 3 main domains of the MI Spirit? (Hint: They start with the letters “P”, “C”, and “E”. Another hint: they’re listed on page 2 of this T.I.P.) If you get all three of these right, I’ll owe you an extra chocolate when I see you at your next workshop!

Team Leader:

Paul Burke Training & Consulting Group