



Paul Burke Training Group

PO Box 39027, RPO James Bay, VICTORIA, B.C., V8V 4X8
Telephone: 1-250-385-6468. Toll-Free: 1-855-MI-TRAINERS
Web: www.paulburketraining.com
E-mail: info@paulburketraining.com

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

Thoughts on Improved Practice (TIP) 1825

Resistance is Discordant!



"The good news is that in MI, change is predicted not by the client's level of commitment at the start, but rather by the pattern of change in motivation over the course of the session (Amrhein, 2003). You're not responsible for the client's starting point, but you do have considerable influence over what happens next. MI has been found to be a particularly effective approach for helpers who work with people who seem angry and defensive at the outset (Karno & Longabaugh, 2004; Waldron, Miller & Tonigan, 2001)" (from Miller & Rollnick, MI3, p. 207).

RESISTANCE IS DISCORDANT IN MI!

Question: What is the sound of a helper who is working to elicit plans for change with a client who is still trying to engage in the conversation?

Answer: Discord. Disharmony. (Cause: Lack of collaboration).

Question: What is the sound of a client who needs to hear himself talk about the upside of not changing with a helper who is asking questions about the advantages of change?

Answer: Discord. Disharmony. (Cause: Lack of collaboration).

Question: What is the sound of two musicians playing – but each from different pages of the music?

Answer: Discord. Disharmony. (Cause: Lack of Collaboration).

Question: What is the sound of the relationship when the helper spends most of her time filling her client with good advice, valuable information, and great solutions, even though the client doesn't yet have much of a concern about the "problem behaviour"?

Answer: Discord. Disharmony. (Cause: Lack of evocation).

For many years now, Bill Miller and & Stephen Rollnick have spoken about their discomfort with the term "resistance" when used in discussions about MI practice. Even when they wrote MI-2 (2002), they



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talked about how, in the MI mindset, it was important to frame “resistance” as a relationship dynamic and not a function of client pathology, or poor motivation. Still, even while framing it that way, they had trouble identifying a better way to explain the phenomenon. Thus, in MI-2, they simply encouraged us to understand that one cannot “resist” unless there is something or someone to resist against; e.g. that it takes two to tango!



In MI-3 (2013), Miller and Rollnick decided to reframe the MI perspective on “resistance”! In MI, we are encouraged now to think about relationship discord instead. Most of us who become comfortable in the MI way of working find that we are somewhat resistant to the concept of “change resistance” in the first place – so this isn’t a big stretch!

We’re now at a point of understanding that the concept of “resistance” is pretty much entirely discordant with the MI way of understanding client and helper relationship dynamics. ***Simply stated, the bottom line is that what we used to think of as “resistance” is really nothing more than a sign that the necessary spirit of MI has broken down and that helper-client collaboration is now in jeopardy.***

To use a musical analogy, when two vocalists are attempting to sing a duet only to discover that each are singing different tunes, discord, or disharmony is bound to be the result. Anyone with even the slightest musical ear will hear how out-of-harmony the sound appears and realize that something must be done to bring harmony back into the duet. In MI, it’s almost always the job of the MI helper to adjust his/her tune. ***In effect, the MI helper is the “conductor” of the music in an MI conversation. S/he is the “facilitator of the harmony”. It is up to us as helpers to make the necessary adjustments from time to time when disharmony (discord) shows up to signal us that collaboration has broken down in the helping relationship.***



Dating back some 22 years now, when I took my first workshop from Dr. Rollnick, I recall him saying that “resistance is just a form of client communication”. It is intended to signal you that things are off track; that you and the client are no longer on the same page.

So it is, that ***discord is little more than the sound of two people who are talking out of tune!***



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At this point, you may well be asking “What difference does it make what words we use to describe this problem in client-helper dynamics?” The best answer, I think, is that unlike with the word “resistance”, discord does not imply intent. It is difficult to think of “who’s to blame?” when we think of disharmony in a conversation. Not so with “resistance”. Historically, many other approaches have clearly noted how and why it is that when resistance emerges it is because of something that the client is thinking, feeling, or doing (and, usually, something that the client is doing wrong!) In all, it will likely be much more helpful to ask: ***“when discord signals a problem in the collaborative harmony of the conversation, how does the helper react?”***



Intuitively (maybe even instinctively) clients know how to sound the alarm that things are out of alignment in a conversation. Here are some common sounds that accompany discord:

- **Defensiveness:**
 - Blaming (“Don’t blame me! I can’t help it. If it wasn’t for _____, I wouldn’t be in this mess. Don’t look to me – let’s talk about what’s really causing all of this”)
 - Minimizing (“Yah – there may be some issues here – but it’s not all that bad – at least not compared with _____”)
 - Justifying (“Things have to be this way at the moment. If you understood how complex this all is for me, you’d see that I really have no choice here!”)
- **Squaring Off** (assuming an oppositional stance):
 - “You have no idea what you’re even talking about. You’re just one of those professionals who is book-smart and life-stupid. I’ve had it with that!”
- **Interrupting** (cutting you off or uses vocal volume to overpower your attempts to speak)
- **Disengaging:** (staying in their chair while leaving the room. Losing interest in the conversation, becoming tangential, are finding ways to distract themselves from the present conversation).

Question: Who is to blame for discordance in an MI conversation? The client, or the helper?

Answer: Yes.

In truth, blame has no place in understanding the dynamics of two people not being on the same page.

A Better Question Is: “Who can fix it?”

Answer: In most MI conversations, the helper is the conductor. The MI helper is the one who facilitates the conversation and monitors its spirit to ensure that partnership, acceptance, compassion, and



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evocation are all operating at full capacity so that both parties in the discussion are dancing the same waltz. When client behavior starts to signal that things are out of tune, the MI helper can almost always do a quick “tune up” on one or more of the MI Spirit dimensions. Usually, such adjustments create harmony again in fairly short order – and then the conversation can move forward again – always in the direction of the target behavior or identified goal.

I’ve never met a professional helper who needed assistance in determining when discord was present. The client behaviors that accompany it are clear signals that things are out of tune. The issue for most MI learners is not how to recognize discord. Rather, more often, the big question is “what do I do about it?” We’ll look into ways to “course correct” for dissonance in a future TIP.



In all, the important point is to understand that it is possible to get to the goal of a helpful conversation by skillfully avoiding all the conversational traps that can derail things so fast. By staying attuned and matching with the client’s process (engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning) and by attending to the four spirit dimensions of MI (partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evocation) – we can get to the cheese while still avoiding all the traps!

For this week, I invite you to reflect a little on the following questions after a session where you encounter the sounds of discord:

1. Could any of the disharmony in this conversation have been the result of one or more of the traps having been activated in me? Is my client pushing back because I have fallen into the:
 - a. **Righting reflex?** (“I have to fix this “problem” – even though the client isn’t seeing “the problem”)
 - b. **Hurry-this-up trap?** (“I have no time to get my client “on board”. I need to fix this fast!”)
 - c. **“I-must-install-this-expertise” trap?** (“I know what the problem is here, and I need to get my knowledge/advice into my client as quickly as possible”)
 - d. **‘Premature Focus’ trap?** (“I think I know what we should be focusing on here, so that is what we’re going to focus on, even if my client is not focused”!)
 - e. **‘Question/Answer’ Trap?** (“I will ask a pile of questions to see if I can sleuth-out a theory of what the problem is, or what needs to be done about it, rather than working on activating a desire to implement the change”)
2. How much reflective listening was I doing when the discord emerged? (Often, discord evolves in response to a helper working to “fix” (prematurely), or too quickly, or before the client has suggested that s/he needs something fixed! It can also occur in response to the helper educating, advising, lecturing, or warning the client about what might happen if s/he doesn’t pursue the change.)



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3. Which of the four major MI processes is the client operating within right now? (Am I coming at this conversation from within that same conversational process as my client, or am I ahead of where my client is functioning?) Remember – if your client is still working to find a way to engage and you are busy trying to help them make plans for change – discord is nature’s way of letting you know that it’s time for you to re-engage with your client!

In all, one of the biggest “tricks” to effective MI work is learning how to prevent discord in your conversations with clients – and – how to get things back on track once it has occurred. If you need some help with practicing that, please check out the Rosegren manual (Building Motivational Interviewing Skills: A Workbook for Practitioners. Guilford Press) – and/or Miller and Rollnick’s primary text where they discuss the concept of “discord” from an MI lens.

Best wishes for the kick off of a new MI year!

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