

rolling with resistance motivational interviewing

rolling with resistance motivational interviewing is a cornerstone technique for guiding individuals through change, particularly when they exhibit ambivalence or opposition. This article delves deep into the principles and practical applications of this powerful approach, exploring how to navigate and effectively leverage resistance in the context of motivational interviewing (MI). We will examine the underlying philosophy of MI, understand why resistance arises, and uncover specific strategies for responding constructively rather than confrontationally. Key topics covered include recognizing the different forms resistance can take, the OARS skills in action when facing resistance, and the importance of empathy and collaboration. By understanding and skillfully rolling with resistance, practitioners can foster greater client engagement, promote self-efficacy, and ultimately facilitate lasting behavioral change.

Understanding Rolling with Resistance in Motivational Interviewing

Rolling with resistance is a core principle of motivational interviewing, emphasizing a collaborative and non-confrontational approach to helping individuals explore and resolve their ambivalence about change. Instead of directly challenging or arguing with a client's resistance, the practitioner aims to understand it, explore its underlying reasons, and use it as an opportunity to further the conversation. This technique acknowledges that resistance is a natural and often predictable part of the change process, especially when individuals feel pressured or misunderstood. By embracing and working with resistance, rather than against it, motivational interviewing seeks to disarm defensiveness and build a stronger therapeutic alliance.

The Philosophy Behind Rolling with Resistance

The philosophy underpinning rolling with resistance is rooted in the client-centered tradition. It posits that individuals possess their own intrinsic motivation for change and that the practitioner's role is to help uncover and amplify this motivation. Direct argumentation or advice-giving often triggers a "righting reflex" in clients, leading them to defend their current behaviors. Rolling with resistance aims to avoid this reflex by accepting the client's perspective, even if it's resistant, and exploring it with curiosity and empathy. This approach honors the client's autonomy and self-determination, fostering an environment where they feel safe to explore their thoughts and feelings about change without judgment.

Why Resistance Arises in Motivational Interviewing

Resistance is a multifaceted phenomenon that can emerge for various reasons during a motivational interviewing session. Understanding these triggers is crucial for effectively

rolling with them. Common causes include:

- Perceived pressure or coercion from the practitioner.
- Feeling misunderstood or invalidated.
- Fear of change or the unknown consequences of change.
- Habitual patterns of behavior that are difficult to alter.
- Lack of perceived need for change.
- Previous negative experiences with help-seeking.
- The natural ambivalence inherent in decision-making.
- Concerns about potential losses associated with change.

Recognizing these underlying drivers allows the practitioner to respond with greater sensitivity and strategic skill, rather than resorting to unhelpful confrontation.

Strategies for Rolling with Resistance

Effectively rolling with resistance involves a repertoire of responsive communication skills designed to acknowledge, explore, and reframe the client's ambivalent or oppositional statements. It's about shifting the dynamic from a struggle to a collaborative exploration. The goal is not to eliminate resistance entirely, but to use it as a signal and an opportunity to deepen understanding and strengthen the client's resolve for change.

Recognizing and Responding to Different Forms of Resistance

Resistance can manifest in various ways, and practitioners must be adept at identifying these signals and responding appropriately. The way a practitioner responds can significantly influence whether resistance escalates or de-escalates the conversation.

- **Arguing, Interrupting, Discounting, or Ignoring:** When a client argues, interrupts, dismisses the practitioner's suggestions, or seems to ignore what's being said, it's a clear sign of resistance. Instead of arguing back, the practitioner might acknowledge their frustration or restate their understanding of the client's point.
- **Labeling:** Clients might label themselves or the situation in ways that indicate resistance, such as saying "I'm not a bad person" or "This is just how I am." The practitioner can reflect these labels back, perhaps with a gentle inquiry into their meaning.

- **Telling Stories of Inertia:** Clients might recount experiences that seem to justify their lack of change or their current situation. Acknowledging these stories and exploring the emotions and beliefs behind them can be helpful.
- **Avoiding/Ignoring Promises:** When clients make commitments but then fail to follow through, it can be a form of resistance. The focus should then shift to exploring the barriers to fulfilling those promises.

Each form of resistance requires a tailored response, prioritizing empathy and open-ended questions.

Utilizing OARS Skills When Encountering Resistance

The foundational OARS skills of Motivational Interviewing are particularly crucial when navigating resistance. They provide the tools to respond constructively and maintain a collaborative stance.

- **Open-ended Questions:** Instead of asking "Do you want to change?" which can elicit a "no," practitioners can ask "What concerns you about X?" or "What might be some good things about changing Y?" This invites deeper exploration.
- **Affirmations:** Recognizing and acknowledging a client's strengths, efforts, or positive intentions, even in the face of resistance, can build rapport and disarm defensiveness. For instance, "It takes a lot of courage to talk about these difficult issues" can be very powerful.
- **Reflections:** This is arguably the most powerful tool for rolling with resistance. Reflecting back what the client has said, often with a slightly different wording or emphasis, shows that the practitioner is listening and understanding. Simple reflections can de-escalate tension. Complex reflections, which infer underlying meaning, can help the client explore their own ambivalence more deeply.
- **Summaries:** Periodically summarizing the conversation, including the client's resistant statements alongside their ambivalent feelings, can help them see the bigger picture and identify their own readiness for change. Summaries can also be used to link different statements about resistance and highlight potential pathways forward.

The skillful application of OARS allows the practitioner to stay attuned to the client's perspective and guide them towards self-discovery rather than imposing solutions.

The Role of Empathy and Collaboration

Empathy is the bedrock of rolling with resistance. It involves striving to understand the client's internal frame of reference and communicating that understanding. When a client feels truly heard and understood, their defensiveness often diminishes, making them more open to exploration. Collaboration means working with the client, as opposed to on them. It

involves framing the process as a partnership where both parties have a role, and the client is the expert on their own life and their own motivations for change.

Exploring the Ambivalence Revealed by Resistance

Resistance itself is often a manifestation of ambivalence. When a client pushes back, it signals that there are competing desires or beliefs at play. Rolling with resistance provides an opportunity to explore this underlying ambivalence. For example, if a client says, "I know I should quit smoking, but I just don't want to," a practitioner might respond by reflecting, "So on one hand, you see the good reasons for quitting, and on the other hand, there's a strong part of you that doesn't feel ready or willing to do so right now." This opens the door to exploring the "why" behind both sides of the ambivalence.

Advanced Techniques in Rolling with Resistance

While the core principles of OARS and empathy are fundamental, there are more advanced techniques that practitioners can employ when resistance proves particularly stubborn or complex.

Using Double-Sided Reflections

A double-sided reflection acknowledges both sides of a client's ambivalence, particularly when one side is expressed as resistance. For instance, "You've said that you know you need to exercise more for your health, and at the same time, you find it really hard to get motivated to go to the gym." This technique directly addresses the conflict the client is experiencing, validating both their awareness of the need for change and the difficulty they face in initiating it.

Reframing Resistant Statements

Reframing involves restating a client's statement in a way that offers a new, more positive, or more constructive perspective. This should be done gently and with careful attention to the client's initial statement. For example, if a client says, "I've tried to diet a hundred times and always failed," a reframing response might be, "It sounds like you've had a lot of experience with trying to make dietary changes and haven't found the lasting success you desire. That persistence in trying, even with setbacks, shows a deep commitment to finding a way that works for you." This shifts the focus from failure to persistence and commitment.

Scaling Questions in the Context of Resistance

Scaling questions (e.g., "On a scale of 0 to 10, how ready are you to make this change?") can be useful even when resistance is present. If a client expresses strong resistance but still gives a number above zero, it indicates some level of readiness, however small. The follow-up question, "What makes you give yourself that number, and not a lower one?" can

explore the factors contributing to their minimal readiness and build upon those strengths.

The Importance of Practitioner Self-Awareness

Rolling with resistance also requires significant self-awareness on the part of the practitioner. It's easy to fall into the trap of the "righting reflex" or to become frustrated when clients don't immediately embrace change. Practitioners must be mindful of their own reactions, practice self-compassion, and consistently return to the core principles of MI. Recognizing when their own counter-transference might be influencing their responses is vital for maintaining an effective and client-centered approach.

The practice of rolling with resistance is not about passively accepting negative behaviors or statements. Rather, it is a sophisticated and highly effective communication strategy that leverages the natural dynamics of change to foster collaboration, build rapport, and ultimately empower individuals to make choices that align with their values and goals. By mastering these techniques, professionals in various helping roles can significantly enhance their ability to guide clients through even the most challenging paths to positive transformation.

Frequently Asked Questions

What's the most common pitfall therapists face when trying to roll with resistance in Motivational Interviewing?

The most common pitfall is directly confronting or arguing with the client's resistance. Instead of seeing it as a signal to change their approach, therapists often fall into the trap of trying to 'win' the argument, which typically escalates the resistance and damages the therapeutic alliance.

How can I effectively 'roll with resistance' when a client is repeatedly stating they can't change?

When a client says they can't change, instead of arguing, try reflecting their statement and then exploring the reasons why they feel that way. You could say, 'So you're feeling like change just isn't possible for you right now,' and then ask, 'What makes it feel so impossible?' This validates their feeling while opening the door for further exploration.

What are some specific MI skills that help 'roll with resistance'?

Key skills include reflective listening (especially complex reflections that reframe or acknowledge underlying feelings), asking open-ended questions to explore their perspective, affirming their strengths and efforts, and summarizing to consolidate and

reflect their ambivalence. The core principle is to avoid direct argumentation.

How do I differentiate between genuine ambivalence and 'resistant' behavior in Motivational Interviewing?

While ambivalence is a core component of MI, 'resistance' often arises when the therapist's approach inadvertently elicits defensive reactions. Genuine ambivalence is characterized by a client expressing both reasons for and against change. Resistance might manifest as arguing, interrupting, ignoring, or denying, often in response to perceived pressure or judgment from the therapist.

Is 'rolling with resistance' the same as agreeing with the client?

No, 'rolling with resistance' is not the same as agreeing with the client. It means accepting their statement or behavior as valid from their perspective without judgment or argument. The goal is to understand their viewpoint and use it as a springboard for further exploration and to help them find their own reasons for change, rather than imposing them.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to rolling with resistance in Motivational Interviewing, with short descriptions:

1. Embracing the Unpredictability: Navigating Resistance in Coaching Conversations

This book delves into the art of skillfully responding to client resistance, viewing it not as an obstacle but as an opportunity for deeper exploration. It offers practical strategies for therapists and coaches to acknowledge, validate, and then gently redirect resistance, fostering a collaborative and empowering therapeutic alliance. Readers will learn techniques to understand the underlying reasons for resistance and leverage it to move forward.

2. The Gentle Turn: MI Techniques for Shifting Stalemate

Focusing on the core principles of Motivational Interviewing, this guide provides actionable methods for overcoming communication plateaus. It emphasizes the importance of listening for opportunities to affirm strengths and evoke change talk, even when clients present with significant ambivalence or disagreement. The book is a resource for practitioners seeking to transform difficult interactions into productive dialogue.

3. Dancing with Doubts: An MI Approach to De-escalating Defensiveness

This insightful work explores how to effectively manage client defensiveness and doubt within the framework of Motivational Interviewing. It outlines a compassionate and non-confrontational approach that prioritizes building rapport and understanding the client's perspective before attempting to introduce change. The book equips professionals with the tools to create a safe space for exploration, even when clients are resistant to external suggestions.

4. The Art of the Acknowledge: MI Strategies for Working with "No"

This title highlights the power of acknowledgment as a primary tool for responding to client resistance in Motivational Interviewing. It moves beyond simple agreement, teaching practitioners how to genuinely validate a client's feelings and experiences, even when they are expressing doubt or disagreement. The book provides a nuanced understanding of how to use empathy and reflective listening to build trust and open pathways for change talk.

5. Turning the Tide: MI for Client-Centered Breakthroughs

This book offers a comprehensive guide to using Motivational Interviewing to navigate challenging client behaviors and resistance, ultimately leading to significant breakthroughs. It emphasizes the client's autonomy and intrinsic motivation, providing techniques to help individuals discover their own reasons for change. The authors illustrate how a client-centered approach, especially when embracing resistance, can unlock powerful self-discovery and commitment to action.

6. Beyond the Barrier: MI's Compassionate Response to Reluctance

Exploring the nuances of client reluctance, this resource provides a compassionate and effective framework based on Motivational Interviewing principles. It teaches professionals how to understand the underlying dynamics of resistance and respond with empathy, rather than confrontation. The book offers practical examples and exercises to help practitioners transform seemingly insurmountable barriers into opportunities for growth and change.

7. The Collaborative Current: MI and the Flow of Change Talk

This book emphasizes the collaborative nature of Motivational Interviewing and how to cultivate the flow of change talk, even in the face of resistance. It highlights techniques for actively listening for and reinforcing statements that suggest a desire, ability, reason, or need for change. The authors guide readers through building a partnership with clients, creating an environment where positive shifts can emerge organically.

8. Ripples of Hope: MI's Gentle Engagement with Resistance

This work focuses on the subtle yet profound impact of Motivational Interviewing in gently engaging with client resistance. It provides practical strategies for therapists to foster an atmosphere of trust and understanding, making it safe for clients to explore their ambivalence. The book offers a roadmap for practitioners to move beyond simply overcoming resistance, but rather to use it as a springboard for developing intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy.

9. The Resilient Response: Mastering MI in Difficult Conversations

This title presents a toolkit for professionals to develop a resilient approach to Motivational Interviewing, particularly when encountering resistance. It offers proven techniques for staying grounded, empathetic, and effective when faced with challenging client statements or behaviors. The book aims to empower practitioners to not only manage but also to skillfully leverage resistance as a catalyst for genuine and lasting change.

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