

Motivational Interviewing using Open-ended Questions

Motivational interviewing uses four techniques known as the OARS:

- Open-ended questions
- Affirmations
- Reflections
- Summaries

In this handout, we'll outline the most common types of open-ended questions. For guidance on using reflections in MI, please refer to the resource [*Motivational interviewing reflections & techniques*](#).

Why use open-ended questions?

Open-ended questions water the seeds of motivation and help both coach and client to nurture the tender shoots of growth and change.

Open-ended questions:

- **Build rapport:** Clients feel respected, valued, and heard.
- **Lower the stress of change:** Clients have the space to air what's in their minds, allowing the tension of those thoughts and feelings to be (at least partially) diffused.
- **Create clarity:** Clients can speak openly and honestly about who they are and what matters to them. As they do, they're able to see those things more clearly.
- **Honor client autonomy:** Clients' own expertise is evoked to facilitate their ability to take meaningful action.
- **Create collaborative relationships:** Clients provide rich contextual information about what's relevant and salient to them, giving more opportunities for meaningful collaboration.

How do open-ended questions look and sound?

Types of open-ended questions

Question type	Most useful when	Example
Digging deep	There may be more to the story than your client is saying (or realizes at the moment).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tell me more about X.• How did it feel to experience that?• What makes this goal important to you?
“If any”	You don’t presume your client wants to change anything at all, giving them room to direct the conversation in any direction that they feel serves them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What changes, if any, would you like to make to your vegetable intake?
Changes in the abstract	You want to give your client a pressure-free opportunity to “try on” a change. They can play with different ideas to see what suits them or what could work in the context of their life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you were to start exercising, what type of exercise might you try?• What carbohydrates might you explore?• If you were to set a boundary, how might you communicate that to your partner?• What might it look like if you were to start your evening bedtime routine an hour earlier than you do now?
Strength-based	You’re working with a client who is keen to focus on the reasons why they CAN’T change. These questions draw out strengths, superpowers, and past achievements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What strengths have helped you succeed with changes you’ve made in the past?• Thinking about the struggle you’re experiencing with X, what does that say about you that’s GOOD?

Looking forward	You want to lead clients to new insights on what could specifically help them in their current change process, based on what has (or hasn't) worked before.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think of a time you were exercising regularly. What was different then? • When you were eating in a way that felt more aligned with your goals, how were your daily actions different to what they are now? • Thinking back to that previous success, what did you believe about yourself and your ability to persevere through challenges?
Reasons for change	You want to elicit literal and direct change talk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What makes now a good time to make this change? • What would be better in your life if you made this change?
Querying extremes	You want to help your client explore the best and worst case scenarios.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's the worst potential outcome of not making this change?
Disarming	You want to help clients explore their reasoning for <i>not</i> changing. (That reasoning is valid, too.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you like about drinking wine in the evenings? • What is good about the status quo?
Change ruler	You want to get a more specific measure for your client's readiness, motivation, interest, and commitment to making a particular change.	<p>Part one:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On a scale of 1-10, how ready do you feel to...? • On a scale of 1-10, how important is it to you to...? <p>Part two:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me more about what made you choose a 7 rather than, say, a 6. • I'm curious about what made you choose a 4. • What might help you increase that 7 to an 8?