



Using Motivational Interviewing to Engage Youth in Healthy Conversations About Alcohol

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Thank you for working with youth (aged 14 to 24) in our communities. You have an opportunity to support young people during a period of tremendous growth, development, and transition. In your role(s), you can help to guide youth to make decisions that will support their health and well-being now and as they transition into adulthood and greater independence.

A relationship-based approach can help to strengthen a young person's resilience. Tailoring your approach and interactions to focus on building relationships with each young person, based on their unique needs, strengths, and circumstances, can create an environment where young people feel seen and respected.

One thing that all youth have in common is a sensitivity to how they are spoken to. They don't want to be told what to do and how to do it. They want to make their own decisions and, for the most part, are capable of doing so. Sometimes youth need support while making these decisions.

This module has been developed as an introduction to motivational interviewing skills and strategies that can help those working with youth to engage them in conversations about their health and well-being. Engaged youth are those that feel valued and empowered to make their own decisions about their well-being, engage in healthy conversations, seek support, and share information with peers.

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Module Goals

1. To increase the understanding of adult allies on the value of brief interventions when engaging youth, specifically motivational interviewing.
2. To provide practical tools to adult allies to assist in engaging youth in conversations about alcohol and alcohol-related harms.

Motivational Interviewing: An approach that works

This module introduces motivational interviewing (MI); a communication approach that helps to guide people to change behaviours that can be harmful to health and well-being, such as dangerous alcohol use. MI was developed as a brief intervention for adult problem drinkers and is now used across many fields of work, including with adolescents and young adults. MI skills help us to pay close attention to how we talk, listen, and respond to people.

MI is not easy to learn; it takes practice and time. Sometimes we have to change practices that have been based on training to assess, focus on, and convince youth to change harmful behaviours. It takes intentionality to replace these methods with this new approach, MI. It can feel awkward for some time. With practice, it becomes easier and more natural.

MI skills help us pay close attention to the individual's strengths, values, motivation, and efforts to change. Using a strength-based lens and shifting the conversation to focus on values can lead to positive outcomes. The more we guide the person to talk about the possibility of change, the more likely change will happen. The more the person talks about staying the same, the more likely they are to do so.

A person skilled in MI will listen and empathize with someone's desire to stay the same and not change, but will shift the conversation, at the right time, to the idea of change. In this manual, you will learn some of the basic communication strategies to support these conversations about change.

Alcohol Use

Everyone, including youth, has a different experience with alcohol. How alcohol is used within families, communities, and peer groups can influence how youth use alcohol themselves.

Alcohol is a commonly used psychoactive substance in Canada and in Saskatchewan (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction [CCSA], 2019; Saskatchewan Ministry of Health, 2009). Society's acceptance of alcohol can lead to relaxed attitudes about drinking and little attention to its possible negative outcomes. Alcohol is linked to socializing and those who choose not to drink are often pressured and questioned as to their reasons. The availability and acceptance of alcohol can make it less likely that people will look at their own drinking habits.

According to the 2017 Canadian Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey (CTADS), 78.4% of Saskatchewan residents (aged 15 years and over) reported using alcohol in the past 12 months (Health Canada, 2017). The national average is 78.2% (Health Canada, 2017).

In a Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Abuse report, Statistics Canada data from 2019 confirms that about 8 in 10 youth aged 18-24 reported drinking alcohol. About 40% of Canadian students in Grades 7-12 also reported alcohol use. The average age that youth start drinking is just over 13 years old (CCSA, 2019).

Risky drinking can impact youth (aged 14 to 24) in many ways, such as:

- memory loss
- sexual coercion and assaults
- unsafe sex
- unplanned pregnancies
- risk of sexually transmitted infections
- binge drinking
- alcohol toxicity
- motor vehicle crashes
- suicide
- self-harm
- increased risk for certain chronic diseases
- substance use disorders
- learning and memory issues
- poor academic performance
- increased risk of school dropout
- unemployment
- social isolation
- depression
- mental health disorders

(Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], 2018; Stewart et al., 2005)

In 2018, Canadian researchers developed Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines (Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction [CCSUA], 2018). The Guidelines encourage individuals (up to age 24) to delay drinking alcohol as long as possible as youths' brains are still developing until early adulthood. If youth choose to drink, the Guidelines suggest no more than two times a week, and only one or two standard drinks each time.

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines also suggest that drinking should occur with parental guidance and that youth should plan ahead to consider drinking in the safest environment possible (CCSUA, 2018). For some youth, talking to their parents about alcohol may not be ideal. Sometimes parents are struggling with addictions themselves. Others may get angry and simply forbid their teens from drinking instead of having a two-way conversation that allows the youth to be open and honest.

For some youth, you may be the ideal person to speak with about alcohol. MI skills can help to encourage youth to consider making decisions to minimize the harms from alcohol that they might experience. An MI approach can be considered a form of harm reduction.

How You Listen Matters

Listen with your full attention to understand

Think back to a time you had something important to share with someone. Perhaps it was a traumatic experience or a problem that had big consequences for you. It takes a certain amount of vulnerability to share with others. Now imagine the person you opened up to shifts the conversation to when they experienced a similar event, or they throw solutions at you for how you should fix the issue. Perhaps this happened to you. How did you feel? Most likely you experienced some let-down or disappointment. You might have decided internally not to share these deep feelings with that person again. It just didn't feel helpful. You didn't feel listened to. You may have felt shut down.

Instead, imagine opening up to someone who gives you their full attention. They turn their bodies toward you, listen intently, and nod their heads. They shut out other distractions and make you feel like your story is important. They reflect back what you say to them and sometimes even reflect back some deep feeling that you hadn't expressed out loud and it really nails how you are feeling. They understand you. They ask a few questions that help you really work through the issue and maybe you decide on a course of action. They see and mention your strengths. When the conversation ends, you feel listened to, and more confident and hopeful.

Listen with empathy

Most likely, what you experienced in the second scenario is a person who listens with empathy and with good communication skills. Empathy is the ability to imagine what it is like to experience what someone else is going through, even if you haven't experienced it yourself. It's like walking in their shoes for a while to imagine what their life is like. You don't have to be a counsellor or have a university degree to show empathy. Anyone can learn empathy. You can practice empathy by deliberately considering what others are experiencing, thinking, and feeling. Practice expressing empathy out loud.

Listen without judgement

Each of us has a unique set of experiences and a unique way of doing things. What works for one person might not work for someone else. What we think is the right decision or the right way to do something will not be the right way for everyone. Understanding this and accepting each person for who they are and what they do, builds acceptance and trust. With trust comes the opportunity to provide support and guidance.

Have you ever felt judged by someone else for something you did? What did judgement look like? You might have seen it on someone's facial expression or in their body language. You might have heard it in their tone of voice or the words they said to you. Recall how it made you feel. Did it make you feel angry, guilty, or something else?

Judgement can feel stigmatizing and can create a situation where we begin to judge ourselves. Most likely, you would not trust that the person is 'in your corner', and you might not be eager to have another conversation with them. Judgement, shame, and guilt can increase the behaviour we are trying to change.

If we have strong beliefs about something, how do we remove our judgement? One example is when a pregnant woman drinks alcohol. Many people judge her without thinking about the reasons she might be drinking. They see only the potential harm to the baby and feel they must say something. However, if you listen with respect and are non-judgemental, you open up the opportunity to help her explore her alcohol use and she may come to the decision herself that quitting or reducing drinking might be the best thing for her baby and herself.

Understand and accept ambivalence

Ambivalence is feeling two ways about something. It is the coexistence of opposing attitudes, feelings, or actions. An example is someone who smokes cigarettes and would really like to quit. It is like they are sitting on a fence and can see both sides of the argument they are having with themselves. When they look on one side of the fence, they recognize that they get pleasure from smoking, it helps them to relax, and they don't want to quit. They want to 'stay the same' and continue smoking. If they look on the other side of the fence, they recognize that they would feel healthier, save money, and be a better example for their kids if they could quit. They want both things and feel trapped in their ambivalence.

Ambivalence is normal and we all experience it. Working through ambivalence is what MI is all about.

Express your empathy and understanding

How do you show a young person that you are listening? There are a few things you can do to demonstrate that you are listening.

- **Body language and facial expressions:** Orient yourself to the person, look at them, have an open posture. Take your cues from the young person, however, as not everyone likes intense eye contact. Sometimes a less intense posture feels less threatening.
- **Clear away distractions:** Clear your mind so you can listen. Don't be distracted by your phone, what's next on your agenda, or what you might cook for dinner. Be in a quiet place to reduce external noise and busyness.
- **Really listen:** What is the youth feeling? What are they experiencing? What are they thinking? Listen for their strengths. Listen between the lines. What might be there that they are not saying out loud?

- **Listen reflectively:** Reflect back what you hear from youth. This means saying out loud what you have heard. This is called reflective listening. It serves, like a mirror, to help the person see and understand themselves. It also communicates that you care, you are listening carefully, and you are working to understand them.

Reflective Listening

There are many types of reflections you can use to help you listen. Some are simple and others are more complex. They might feel unnatural for a time, and with practice, they will begin to feel more natural.

Simple reflections

There are two types of simple reflection that will be reviewed in this section: repeat and paraphrasing.

Repeat: Repeat what they say. Use this reflection sparingly as it can be annoying. For example, if a youth says, *I feel so alone*¹, you respond back, *you feel so alone*.

Paraphrase: Rephrase what they say using different words, but without changing the meaning. For example, if a youth says, *I feel so alone*, you respond back, *you feel like you're on your own*.

The space below has been provided for you to practice simple reflections. How would you respond to the following statements?

1. *I don't really care what they think.*

2. *I can't believe how drunk we were. We could hardly stand up and yet we got into a crazy fight in the parking lot.*

¹ Throughout this module, examples of conversations will be written in italics.

Complex reflections

Complex reflections add something to what the youth has said. By listening attentively, you make a statement that includes a guess about a hidden feeling or thought. If your guess is wrong, it is OK. If you genuinely try to understand and reflect, the young person will most likely correct you and tell you what they are really experiencing. For example: You could say, *I imagine you are really angry about that.* In response, the young person might say, *well no, actually it makes me feel very sad.*

Complex reflections are powerful as they help individuals to think deeply and learn about themselves. Remember, even a complex reflection that doesn't hit the mark, will support youth to express themselves.

There are many different types of complex reflections. This module has information about the following complex reflections: double-sided, use a metaphor, and finish the paragraph.

Double-sided: It is normal for people to feel ambivalent. Using a double-sided reflection validates and reflects both sides of their ambivalence. When providing a double-sided reflection, use the word and instead of 'but' in between both ideas. This reflection validates the person's feelings and thoughts and that both sides of the fence are important to consider. Alternatively, using the word 'but' negates one side of the ambivalence and is judgemental.

Try to end the sentence with the side of ambivalence that could potentially minimize harm and support a healthy change. It is human nature to respond to the last thing we hear, so if you end on the side of ambivalence that supports a healthy change, a youth will likely respond from this starting place.

A non-judgemental neutral tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language are also important. Some examples of double-sided reflections can be seen below.

- *You like to party hard with your friends, and you also want to keep the peace at home.*
- *You feel some pressure to keep drinking with your boyfriend, and you want to have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby.*

Think of a person you know who is feeling ambivalent about making a change. Write a double-sided reflection that would fit their circumstance, being sure to end the sentence on the side of possible healthy change.

_____ and
_____.

Sometimes, the second part of the double-sided reflection has not been stated by the person, but there may be some hints that you pick up on that suggest there is ambivalence. By suggesting the other side of the equation, you are planting the idea of the possibility for change.

For example, *A part of you thinks there is nothing wrong with drinking until you black out and another part of you has decided to talk about what's happening and thinks this might be time to sound the alarm for yourself.*

Think about a change you have felt ambivalent about, for example, exercising, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, or dieting. Write a double-sided reflection that expresses both sides of your ambivalence.

On the one hand _____

and on the other hand, _____.

You can respond to double-sided statements by adding feeling or meaning that was not already said. Examples can be seen below.

- *You are pretty upset by the way your friends treated you this weekend.*
- *You wish your parents would trust you.*
- *You really value your freedom and don't want to jeopardize that.*

For practice, read the following statement and respond by adding feeling or meaning.
I really struggle in school. I'm not very motivated to be there. I hate speaking up in class and trying to get participation marks. I really hate that the teacher seems to pick on me.

Use a metaphor: A metaphor conjures up a visual image in people's minds. Some people can relate to metaphors and using them can both help them to feel understood and provide a language for further discussion. Some examples of metaphors can be seen below.

- *You feel like the black sheep of the family.*
- *You're stuck between a rock and a hard place.*
- *It's like you're driving a car with no brakes.*

Some people find it easy to come up with metaphors and other people find them more difficult. If you find them too difficult, you could start by memorizing one or two that you could use as you support youth.

Find three metaphors that you may use in your work with youth and write them here.

Finish the paragraph: With this type of complex reflection, you continue a sentence or paragraph by guessing at what might come next. For example, a young woman says, *He [her boyfriend] tries to control everything I do and who I see. Last week he yelled at me and made me feel pretty scared. Then last night he pushed me against the wall and was swearing at me.* You can respond, *and you are wondering if it might be time to end this relationship.* This allows her to consider what you have said and respond. She might say, *yes, I guess I am* or *no, I really love him. I just need to figure out how to fix this.* Whatever she responds, listen without judgement.

Now it is your turn to practice. How might you respond to the following? *My friends love to smoke weed and they are doing it all the time. Even though I am trying hard to quit, they are always bugging me to join in. Sometimes I stay strong and say no, and sometimes I give in and do it.*

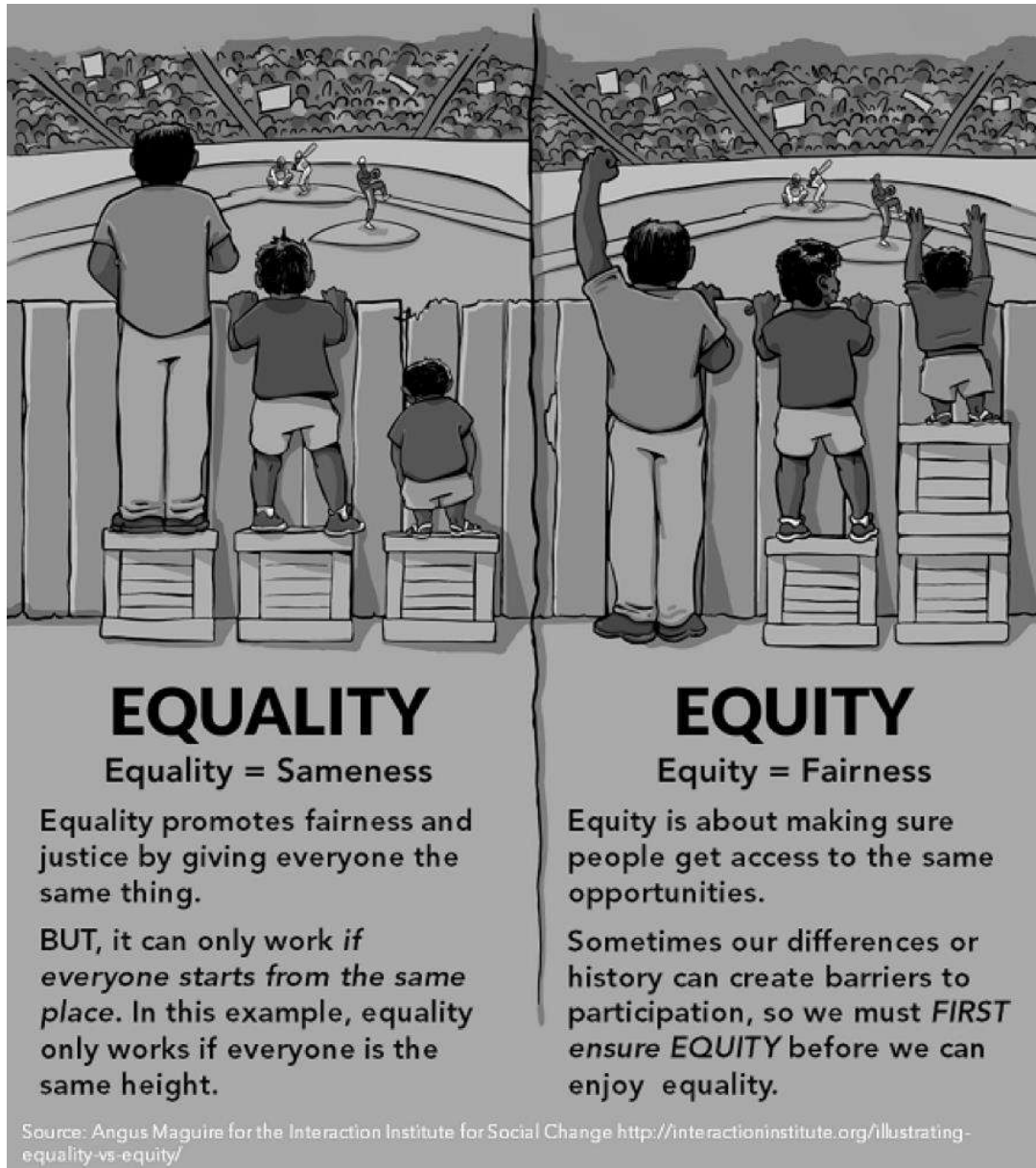
and _____

What You Say Matters

Your values affect what you say

Values such as equity, respect, compassion, and acceptance are important when engaging youth. These values shape our interactions and communication with people.

Equity is ensuring that there is fairness in access and participation in services, events, opportunities, and society.



(Interaction Institute for Social Change, 2016)

Every human being deserves to be respected; to be recognized for their worth and value as a human being. Think about people who show you respect and how it makes you feel. What do others do to make you think that they respect you? How do you feel when you are respected? How do you show youth that they are respected and valued?

Compassion is having awareness and understanding of the suffering someone is experiencing and having a desire to help to relieve it. It doesn't mean you try to fix a youth's problems or tell them what to do. You do your best to understand what they are going through, and you are there to listen to them and support them. Think of a time when you were treated with compassion. What did compassion look like for you? How do you show compassion when you are working with youth?

Acceptance, at its core, involves understanding that no one is perfect, we all have strengths and flaws, and that people are valued regardless of this. Acceptance requires us to be compassionate and non-judgemental, to understand where a person is at, and try not to change them or find fault in them. When people feel accepted, they have the space to consider making a change. When youth feel unaccepted, they may feel the need to defend their position, or feel unworthy of another person's time and energy.

Acceptance does not mean we have to accept abusive behaviour, including breaking agreements, disrespect, and violence. Setting limits increases feelings of safety and respect.

One of the benefits of using a motivational interviewing approach is that it is an effective intervention even if you only have a very short time to spend with someone. This is perfect, as we don't often have long periods of time to have deep conversations with youth. Even a five-minute conversation can be meaningful. A few respectful, short interactions can build a trusting relationship that might give you the opportunity to continue a conversation another time. Something you say that shows respect, compassion, and acceptance can linger with a youth you are talking with. It may act like a seed for further thought, care, and action.

Questions: Opening the conversation and opportunities for self-reflection

One of the most important things in motivational interviewing is to engage youth so they can open up and talk to you and figure themselves out rather than you talking at them or telling them what to do. Open-ended questions, those that require a longer, thought out answer, are great for opening conversations, and prompting self-reflection. Open-ended questions often start with 'what', 'how' or, carefully, with 'why'. 'Tell me', even though it is not technically a question, is also a good start to an open-ended question. The opposite of an open-ended question is a closed-ended question, those that can be answered with one or two words, such as yes, no, OK, and I'm fine.

When asking questions, ensure there is no judgemental tone in your voice – just a curiosity about what they think. The fourth question below gives an example where this may come into

play. Questions should also use non-committal words such as *if you could* or *what might that be* to help the person consider change without thinking that you are trying to force something onto them. The fifth sentence below shows an example of this.

As you read through the open-ended examples below, try to imagine if someone was asking you these questions and how you would respond.

1. *What are your thoughts about drinking?*
2. *How does alcohol fit into your life?*
3. *What have you experienced when you drink?*
4. *Why do you think your parents are concerned about your drinking?*
5. *If you could change one thing about the way you drink, what might that be, and why?*
6. *Tell me why you choose not to drink when there is so much pressure from your friends?*

Write down 3 open-ended questions that feel natural to you. Open-ended questions do not always come naturally, but with practice they can.

?

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Closed-ended questions should be limited in an MI conversation. They tend to collect short answers that do not provide information or continue a conversation. By using closed-ended questions, the interviewer is also steering the conversation to where they want to go instead of allowing the youth to talk about what is important to them.

Examples of closed-ended questions include:

- *Do you drink?*
- *How many drinks do you have each weekend?*
- *Do you have a girlfriend?*
- *Are you sexually active?*

Close-ended questions can make youth feel like they are being interrogated.

Using MI, it is important to limit the number of questions that you ask and when you do ask questions, use open-ended questions. A general rule of thumb is using one or two reflection statements for every question that you ask.

Building confidence supports change

When young people feel confident, they believe in their ability to make changes to improve their lives and stand up for what they believe in. Confidence can be boosted when youth receive affirmations from people that they respect and trust. An affirmation is a genuine statement that describes someone's strengths, something about their character, their values, what they are striving for, or their actions.

When you give a youth an affirmation, it needs to be genuine and specific – something you really see and believe. Instead of saying “good job”, be more specific, and describe exactly what you mean. An example of a specific affirmation is *you really protect yourself and your friends when you insist that no one drives after drinking.*

Carefully consider when and how often you provide affirmations. You can think of affirmations like salt in a pot of soup. If you use too much salt, the soup is ruined. If you use no salt, the soup is bland and feels like it is missing something. Affirmations need to be part of the conversation but used in moderation.

When you praise youth or cheerlead instead of providing an affirmation, the statement ends up being more about you than about the youth. *I'm proud of you, you're a good mom, great job, I know you can do it,* are examples of praise and cheerleading. Typically, these statements do not lead to change. Oftentimes, in fact, praising or cheerleading sets youth up to try to please you or make you proud. Then, if they falter, they might feel ashamed to come and see you.

Some examples of affirmations can be seen below.

- *You have given this a lot of thought.*
- *You are such a loyal friend. You make sure your friends are safe when the party gets crazy.*
- *You're a very resourceful person.*
- *You tell the truth even when there are tough consequences.*
- *You see where you want to end up and you are taking steps to get there.*

Seeing a young person's strengths and character takes practice. So often, society sees the negative side of youth. You can improve your view and practice this by reflecting deliberately about the positive aspects of each individual.

Think about a youth you know well and write three affirmations that will help to build their confidence.

- _____
- _____
- _____

Let them know they can make their own decisions

Everyone makes their own decisions, including youth. Sometimes there are positive and negative consequences to the decisions that are made. Even if you understand that there may be negative consequences for a decision, it is important that you let youth make their own decision.²

Sometimes in a conversation with youth, if you try to tell them what to do, they will show resistance in your conversation. If you feel the young person you are talking to begin to resist, an effective approach is to tell them out loud that you are not trying to decide for them or force them to change. In fact, you can do this proactively at the beginning of a conversation.

- *Only you can decide for yourself how you will handle this.*
- *It is your decision.*
- *I can't make this decision for you. It's your choice.*
- *It is totally up to you whether you quit drinking, cut down, or make no changes to your drinking.*

Time for you to practice giving them their autonomy out loud.

- _____
- _____

Sharing information

Try to avoid giving a lot of information to youth at one time. It changes your relationship and makes them think you are trying to fix them. What you might notice in their response is an argument to stay the same and not change.

Before sharing information about alcohol and alcohol-related harms, ask youth what they have already heard or know. You can draw this out by asking an open-ended question like the ones seen below.

- *What have you heard about the impact of alcohol?*
- *What do you know about how alcohol affects young people?*

These questions open the conversation in a non-judgemental, non-threatening way.

You may have information that could be beneficial. Always ask permission to share information. For example, *is it alright with you if I share some information about Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines?*

² Keep in mind that your duty to report if you feel that a youth is being neglected or abused, or planning to seriously harm themselves or another person, supersedes your confidentiality agreement with the youth as well as efforts to remain neutral.

If you take the time to ask permission, youth will likely say yes and will be more open to hearing what you have to say. Share one or two pieces of information. Remember that sharing too much information can feel like a lecture. Once you have shared the information, ask youth questions eliciting them to share what they think and how they feel about the information. For example:

- *What do you make of that?*
- *How might that fit for you?*

Asking these questions help youth to feel like they are controlling the conversation. Ultimately, no matter what the information is, it is up to them whether they will incorporate it into their lives.

What Youth Say Matters

Get them talking

“You do not know what you yourself think until you put it into words.” This quote from Garrison Keillor, an American radio personality, fits with MI perfectly. In an MI conversation, we want youth to talk more than we do. Talking about an issue helps us to figure out what we think, what we feel, and if we want to do something to change the situation. This approach allows youth to create their own arguments for change. Doing so is motivating and can lead to sustained change.

Listen for hints that youth may be considering making a change

Change talk happens when a youth gives you hints that they may be considering a change. Examples of change talk can be seen below.

- *I’d really **like** to take a break from drinking.* Indicating a desire to change.
- *I **wish** I could get along with my dad, but we fight all the time.* Indicating a desire to change.
- *I know I **could** cut back. I’ve done it once before.* Indicating an ability to change.
- *I **need to** slow down my drinking so that I can do well in school.* Indicating a need to change.
- *I **have to** figure out how to say no to my friends.* Indicating a need to change.
- *I **have to** quit for **my health**. I can see where this is going.* Indicating a need and reason to change.

When you hear change talk, reflect back what the youth is saying to encourage more talk about the possibility of change. You can also ask an open-ended question to encourage the youth to explore further. Some examples of ways to respond to change talk can be seen below.

- *You are thinking that a break from alcohol might bring good things.*
- *School is important to you, and you see that cutting back your drinking will help you do well.*
- *What concerns you about your health?*

Sometimes change talk indicates a stronger commitment to making a change and lets us know that they are getting pretty close.

- *I'm **going to master this**.* Committing to change.
- *I **will cut back**.* Committing to change.
- *I've **already stopped drinking on weekdays**.* Taking steps towards change.

If you don't hear change talk, asking open-ended questions might lead to it. Keep in mind that change talk includes a **desire** for change, an **ability** to change, **reasons** for change, a **need** for change, **taking steps** toward change, and **committing** to change.

Some examples of questions that draw out change talk can be seen below.

- *What would you wish could change with your drinking?*
- *Tell me about something you were able to change in the past?*
- *What reasons do you have to consider cutting back?*
- *What have you already shifted with your desire to stop drinking?*
- *How might you talk to your friends about your need to stop drinking?*
- *What are you willing to do?*

Notice that non-committal language is used so that the youth does not feel like you are pushing them to change (consider, might). The timing of these questions is also key. For example, you wouldn't open a conversation with the last question, "*what are you willing to do?*" This one would be offered at a place in the conversation where you feel confident that they are in a place to consider change.

What You Don't Say Also Matters

Don't tell youth what to do, let them figure it out for themselves

Youth are capable of making their own decisions. When we offer youth solutions and reasons for change, we are taking the decision to change and how to change away from them. Ideally, youth will make their own arguments for change. That is where the power is – that is what predicts change.

We have a tendency, especially when it comes to successfully quitting using alcohol or tobacco, to think that sharing our story of success might help someone else quit. There are times when sharing our own story can have a powerful impact. Typically, the time is not when we are trying to engage youth to talk about and consider their own alcohol use. It is important, at this time, to do less talking and more listening.

Mastering Motivational Interviewing

This module has provided an overview of a complex communication approach. If you have found this interesting and would like to get better at it, find opportunities to take workshops in MI so that you have lots of practice time, coaching, and feedback from someone with expertise in MI.

There are many videos on YouTube demonstrating MI, although they are of varying quality. Watch a video and deliberately look for the elements we have explored: reflective listening, affirmations, open-ended questions, and giving autonomy. How does the interviewer demonstrate respect, acceptance, and compassion?

By mastering MI, you will support the youth you work with to figure themselves out, make thoughtful decisions that fit for them, and become more confident.

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