Motivational Interviewing: Helping Your Patients on the Path to Tobacco Cessation Success

Motivational interviewing (MI) is an evidence-based counseling approach designed to strengthen motivation and commitment for engaging in positive behavioral change. MI techniques can be used by various types of healthcare providers to help patients increase their readiness to change or quit the use of tobacco. Brief MI can be most effective when used proactively prior to engaging in evidence-based treatment but is also beneficial after treatment entry to increase attendance and adherence.

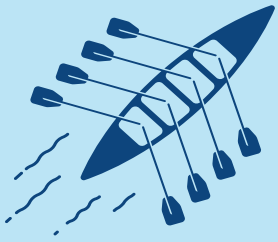
Healthcare professionals can help military service members and veterans in their journey towards successful tobacco cessation by utilizing MI techniques to help patients better understand their reasons for smoking, assess their desire to reduce or quit tobacco, and/or stay successful in their cessation efforts.

MI Skills and Techniques

MI is a collaborative style of communication designed to increase patients' motivation and commitment to treatment, including in the setting of smoking cessation. MI is a patient-centered approach in which the provider does not force or instruct a patient toward behavior change, but instead expresses empathy, avoids confrontation, gently manages resistance to change and enhances self-efficacy through various techniques.

The sample dialogue between a provider and patient on the next pages highlight specific MI techniques. These techniques can be useful to:

- Enhance motivation
- Facilitate "change talk"
- Clarify readiness
- Articulate reasoning
- Consider options
- Ask permission to revisit in the future



"OARS" is a useful acronym to remember MI techniques.

Open-ended questions: engage in conversation with patients by asking questions beyond those with "yes" and "no" answers

Affirmations: highlight and reinforce patients' strengths and actions

Reflective listening: actively listen to patients' words and body language to understand their experiences and convey empathy

Summarizations: organize thoughts and provide an overview of what patients are saying to confirm a shared understanding of the conversation

Sample Dialogue with Patient Willing to Discuss Cessation

Patient	Provider	MI Technique
	Can you describe your smoking habits?	Open-ended questions
Usually, I go through a pack a week but lately I noticed that I'm buying a pack every couple of days. I don't know, I've been stressed out about the upcoming tour, and I think it's starting to affect me. I came to talk to you today because I'm not sleeping and maybe my smoking is part of it.	This is a great opportunity to start this conversation. It sounds like you're smoking more than before and think that it may be linked to stress. What worries you about your smoking?	Reflective listening Open-ended questions
I can't tell if it's helping my stress or just making me feel worse. I just want to make sure I'm at my peak. It's also getting a little expensive buying so many packs.	It sounds like you're thinking about how smoking affects your mental and physical health, and about your finances too." Can I share with you some concerns I have about your tobacco use?	Summarizations Ask permission
Yes, it would be helpful to have a chance to talk about it. I need be at 100% before my next deployment.	Smoking has been linked to depression and anxiety, and you've already brought up your stress level and your health. I'm glad you are open to learning more about the impact of smoking. What changes would you like to make to your tobacco use at this time?	Affirmations Open-ended questions
I'm not sure yet. I know I want to stop eventually or at least cut back, but I really don't know if I can do it.	It sounds like you are thinking about making a change but are also feeling a little scared and really don't know where to start.	Reflective listening
That's right. There's so much to think about and I don't even know what's going to happen in the next couple of months. But I want to start thinking about quitting because I don't want to keep doing this.	Right now, you're ready to consider some next steps. You've taken an important step by setting this goal. This shows a lot of commitment.	Affirmations
Sure, I don't know where to go so it would be helpful to learn more.	"Is it okay if I share some tools and supports that might help you succeed?" "There are a variety of resources for coaching and support, including online and in-person resources." "How has this affected your thinking? Where do you want to go from here?"	Ask-Offer-Ask (Ask permission, offer information, ask again about reactions)

Patient preferences can vary, and some patients may be unprepared or unwilling to fully engage in discussions about tobacco cessation. The sample dialogue between a provider and patient below highlights specific MI techniques to increase "change talk" for patients who express hesitancy or uncertainty about committing to tobacco cessation.

Sample Dialogue with Patient Hesitant to Consider Cessation

Patient	Provider	MI Technique
	"How important is it for you to stop using tobacco (1=not important, 10=very important)?"	
"Right now, I would say maybe a 5. I know it's not good for my health, but I can't imagine stopping completely."		
	"It sounds like your health is a consideration for you when you consider smoking."	Reflective listening
	"Why is it a 5 and not a 3?"	Open-ended questions
"I came here because I was worried about my next fitness test and I think the smoking is just making it worse. But at the same time, it may be helping me in some ways too. I'm wondering if the risks outweigh the benefits."		
	"You're noticing that your endurance isn't where you want it to be. And you're also noticing that there are some risks with smoking."	Summarizations
"Yeah exactly. I know that it hurts my running times but also, I can't imagine throwing away everything that I already bought. It seems so hard to imagine I will never smoke again. I don't know if I can do this."		
	"It takes a lot of courage to own up to that. You've taken an important step by opening up and having this conversation with me."	Affirmations
	"Changing can include cutting down, changing use patterns, using medications before stopping, or stopping entirely. Would you like to discuss making any of these changes?"	Provide a menu of change options
"I'm just not sure. I think I need more time to think about it all."		
	"I understand that right now you don't want to make any changes to your tobacco use. Is it ok if I share resources that you could consider while you think about next steps?"	Reflective listening Ask permission and offer information
"Ok, I will take them, but I may not act on anything just yet."		
	"Sure, let me describe several online and in-person resources for you to consider. And then at your next appointment, we can continue to talk about how to help you reach your goals."	Ask permission to discuss again in the future

Key Takeaway

Motivational interviewing is a patient-centered, collaborative style of communication that can strengthen a patient's motivation and commitment to engage in positive behavioral change. MI is an evidence-based approach and a valuable tool that requires minimal time and can be used by all healthcare providers to help patients on their journey toward successful tobacco cessation.

Resources

YouCanQuit2 (ycq2.org) is a Department of War supported education program for Service Members that offers coaching, online tools, and in-person support locators to help you quit tobacco.

Military OneSource provides 24/7 support and information on housing, financial, legal, medical, and psychological services.
- CONUS: 800-342-9647
- OCONUS and collect options available at: militaryonesource.mil

988 provides free and confidential support for individuals in crisis. If you or someone you know is struggling or in crisis, call or text 988. 988lifeline.org

1-855-QUIT-VET (1-855-784-8838) is a free telephone quit line that offers tobacco cessation counseling to any Veteran who receives their health care through VA. Quit coaches can help throughout the tobacco cessation journey, from thinking about quitting or when ready to quit. More information can be found here: mentalhealth.va.gov/quit-tobacco/quit-vet.asp

Military/Veterans Crisis Line provides free, confidential resource for those in crisis that is available 24/7. Dial 988, then press 1 to talk with a counselor or text 838255 for live chat. OCONUS options available. militarycrisisline.net

Real Warriors Campaign provides resources to decrease stigma, increase psychological health literacy, and open doors to access to care. health.mil/RealWarriors

Reference

1. Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense. (2026). *VA/DOD Clinical Practice Guideline for Tobacco Use Treatment.* Version 3.0. https://www.healthquality.va.gov/HEALTHQUALITY/guidelines/CD/tobacco/Tobacco-Cessation-CPG_2026-Guideline_final_20260109.pdf