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MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING

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Motivational interviewing (MI) is an empirically supported counseling approach that facilitates a client's recognition and resolution of ambivalence about changing his or her behavior. Originally implemented in substance abuse counseling, it has been found in subsequent studies to be effective in modifying a variety of risk-related behaviors. The utilization of MI has been growing in community corrections settings for both staff-offender interactions and staff-supervisor interactions as agencies have moved toward implementation of evidence-based practices. Within community corrections, MI is applied with the underlying assumption that offender motivation is not a fixed trait and that, with the appropriate environment, rehabilitation efforts, and interaction with community supervision officers, offenders have the ability to increase their level of motivation to achieve behavioral change. Experts note that MI might be especially useful in community corrections settings, because it is empirically supported in related fields, emphasizes offender responsibility through self-motivational speech, and allows for client-officer engagement in positive behavioral change discussions, including addressing with clients how to handle resistance and other difficult situations.

The interview and counseling style of MI encourages adherence to four key principles: expressing empathy for the client's perspective, developing a distinction between the client's values and the client's behavior, diffusing client resistance, and supporting the client's self-efficacy. Under the MI model, probation officers are expected to express empathy with offenders by presenting a genuine understanding of the offender's predicament as he or she is going through the cycle of behavioral change. In their interactions, officers must practice active listening and reflect on the offender's verbalizations, while also avoiding arguments with the offender.

MI challenges how much an offender wants to change, which may provoke arguments and, in turn, increase the offender's resistance to change; consequently, it is important for probation officers to encourage offenders to talk about change, as opposed to arguing. By supporting offenders in making positive statements regarding their sense of self-efficacy, probation officers provide offenders with the ability to reframe their thinking patterns. Moreover, when an offender does display resistance to change throughout different stages of the change process, probation officers can address the situation by "rolling with resistance." This is accomplished by delicately challenging the offender through questions, clarifying, and elaborating upon the thought processes that underlie the behavior that is the target of change. Finally, it is important for the offender to have specific goals toward which he or she wants to work and for the officer to identify the discrepancies that exist between the present situation and how the offender's goals will be achieved.

Probation officers can use many motivational interviewing techniques when interacting with clients to promote a behavioral change. The work of W. R. Miller and S. Rollnick includes a discussion of some of the specific motivational interviewing techniques that should be used in community corrections, such as asking open-ended questions, engaging in reflective listening, expressing positive affirmations and support, summarizing what the offender has stated, eliciting self-motivational statements,

elaborating on motivational topics, using extremes in examples, looking backward and forward, and exploring the offender's goals.



Under the motivational interviewing (MI) model, probation officers should use empathy with offenders and conduct themselves in a nonconfrontational manner. MI counseling and interviewing has been found effective in modifying many risk-related behaviors. (Photos.com)

Studies on MI emphasize that, even with implementation of the MI technique, behavioral change takes time and offenders must progress through numerous stages before a permanent change will occur. These stages are typically identified as precontemplation, contemplation, preparation/ planning, action, and maintenance. Officers who acknowledge the effectiveness and need for MI are better able to guide their clients in making the necessary attitudinal and behavioral modifications from existing antisocial behavior to prosocial behavior. To increase an offender's level of motivation toward changing a specific behavior, MI promotes client- and situation-specific strategies for the community supervision officer to implement with each client. Motivational strategies include giving advice, removing barriers, providing choice, decreasing desirability, practicing empathy, providing feedback, clarifying goals, and actively helping. In line with these strategies, probation officers should provide counsel regarding the identification of specific behaviors that require change, but they must also further assist by removing barriers for the offender and increasing service linkages to particular community-based treatment programs. The officer can also enlighten the offender by emphasizing all of the available choices and making it clear that the offender's ability to change lies within him- or herself. Moreover, MI suggests that, while change should be encouraged by the officer, it should not be insisted upon, since such insistence by the officer may cause the offender to develop a defensive stance.

In summary, the impetus behind MI is that officers should decrease the client's ambivalence, or uncertainty, toward behavioral change. So that offenders understand the scope of their present situation, they should be provided with ongoing feedback by people (such as probation officers, family, friends, and treatment providers) with perspectives that are different from their own. Once an offender receives feedback, the officer should attempt to aid the offender in aligning the feedback with the ideal values and goals he or she wishes to achieve. In doing so, the officer can help the offender more clearly distinguish a pathway to those goals. Finally, officers should actively assist

offenders in meeting their goals by demonstrating a genuine interest in helping offenders achieve change. Based on the success of MI in parallel areas (such as substance abuse counseling), experts anticipate that probation officers who use the MI strategies and techniques listed above, in addition to following the key principles of motivational interviewing, will be well equipped to help their clients make the changes in their lives necessary to become productive citizens of society.

See also Correctional Case Managers; Effectiveness of Community Corrections; Offender Supervision

Further Readings

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