



MODULE 5:

Motivational Interviewing and Chronic Pain Management

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a patient-centered conversation approach designed to reduce patient ambivalence about change and enhance motivation to adapt behaviors. When used to discuss pain management, MI facilitates increases in exercise engagement and reductions in short-term pain intensity.¹

The MI approach can help patients to recognize when their current pain management behaviors are not aligned with their life values and goals. Skills and strategies of MI include asking open-ended questions, using reflections, listening with empathy, normalizing ambivalence, presenting personalized feedback, affirming patient efforts, creating an agenda that maps what to change, reducing discord in the therapeutic encounter, asking permission to share information, evoking “change talk”, and reducing “sustain talk”. Patient follow-up steps include reviewing change progress, renewing motivation, and consolidating commitment to change.²

Essential elements of MI include empowering patients, emphasizing personal choice, and increasing patient desire, ability, reasons, and need to change statements to strengthen motivation for change.³

Some examples of MI approaches within a pain management conversation are⁴:

Ask for permission to educate the patient about pain.

- **Pain neuroscience education is an important part of the treatment process. Patient consent to education strengthens the therapeutic alliance and may result in the patient being more receptive to this information.**

Examples:

“Could I share my perspectives on your pain experiences?”

“Could we review some information about short-term and long-term pain management?”

Evoke change talk

- **Allow the patient to voice their desires, abilities, needs, and reasons for change that are important to them and aligned with their value system. Clarify the patient’s views of the pros and cons of changing their pain management choices.**

Examples:

“What would be different if you changed how you are dealing with your pain?”

“What motivates you to have your pain better managed?”

“Why do you think others are concerned about your pain?”

Validate the patient's experience and normalize ambivalence

- Be sure the patient feels heard and validated, including when the patient is not ready to make changes.

Examples:

"You feel discouraged and want some time to think about what we've discussed. I appreciate your willingness to have this challenging conversation."

"It can be hard to make changes in your life when you feel pressured by others. I want to thank you for talking with me about this today/being so open-minded and willing to work together."

Affirm change behavior decisions

- When the patient is ready to make changes, acknowledge the potential positive outcomes.

Examples:

"You are confident in your choice to change from short-term pain relief to more sustainable solutions; you are taking important steps to improve your pain and reach your goals."

Acknowledge Patient Autonomy

- Recognize that the patient is in control of their individualized treatment decisions.

Examples:

"The decision to try a new treatment option is entirely yours. My role is to provide you with the necessary information to help you make an informed choice."

Successful pain management relies on sustained patient behavior change. Implementing MI as a patient-centered approach along with pain education can address ambivalence about change, boost motivation for self-management, and improve treatment outcomes.

¹ Jensen, M. P. (2018). Motivational interviewing and pain management. In P. Karoly & G. Crombez (Eds.), *Motivational perspectives on chronic pain* (online ed.). Oxford Academic. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190627898.003.0011>

² Jensen, M. P. (2018). Enhancing motivation to change in pain treatment. In D. C. Turk & R. J. Gatchel (Eds.), *Psychological approaches to pain management: A practitioner's handbook* (3rd ed., pp. 71–95). The Guilford Press.

³ Douaihy, A., Kelly, T. M., & Gold, M. A. (2023). *Motivational interviewing: A guide for medical trainees* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Nijs, J., Wijma, A. J., Willaert, W., Huysmans, E., Mintken, P., Smeets, R., Goossens, M., van Wilgen, C. P., Van Bogaert, W., Louw, A., Cleland, J., & Donaldson, M. (2020). Integrating motivational interviewing in pain neuroscience education for people with chronic pain: A practical guide for clinicians. *Physical Therapy*, 100(5), 846–859. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ptj/pzaa021>