Traps to Avoid

Motivational Interviewing practitioners have discovered a number of “traps” which prevent full use of the MI approach in working with clients. Here are a few of the most common traps into which interviewers can fall.

1. “Premature Focus” trap
   ▪ Counselor makes assumptions about what is most important to the client before appropriately exploring the client’s own agenda;
   ▪ The counselor may assume readiness for change before it actually exists on the part of the client;
   ▪ When a practitioner persists in talking about his/her own conception of “the problem” and the client has different concerns, the practitioner gets trapped and loses touch with the client, who may become defensive and engage in an adversarial effort to be understood.
   ▪ To avoid getting trapped start with the client’s concern, rather than your own assessment of the problem. In many cases, the client’s concern may lead to your original impression about the situation, but it is critical for that identification to come from the client, not you.

2. “Confrontation / Denial” or “Taking Sides” trap
   ▪ Counselor takes the side of arguing for change re: a perceived problem, which typically prompts the client into defending the other side, i.e., arguing against change;
   ▪ When you detect some information indicating the presence of a problem and begin to tell the client about how serious it is and what to do about it, you have taken sides. This may elicit oppositional “no problem here” arguments from the client.
   ▪ You will want to avoid taking sides, as this can otherwise have the undesired result of literally talking the client out of changing!

3. “Labeling” trap
   ▪ “Diagnosis-driven” approach whereby the counselor may see the client’s acceptance of a label as a starting point for change, even though this typically elicits resistance by the client against being stigmatized or put in a “one-down” power differential position;
   ▪ Diagnostic and other labels can be an obstacle to change. There is no persuasive reason to use labels, and positive change is not dependent upon acceptance of a diagnostic label.
Traps to Avoid

- It is often best to avoid “problem” labels, or at least to refocus attention if/when a label comes up. For example, “Labels are not important. You/your concerns are what’s important, and I’d like to hear more about . . .”

4. “Blaming” trap
   - Wasting time on considerations or determinations of “who is at fault” in, or for, a particular situation;
   - Some clients show defensiveness by blaming others for their situation, but the practitioner needs to make it clear that blaming is irrelevant to the work at hand;
   - It is useful to diffuse blaming by explaining that the placing of blame is not a purpose of counseling. Using reflective listening and reframing, as in, “Who is to blame is not as important as what your concerns are about the situation.”

5. “Question / Answer” trap
   - Pattern whereby the counselor asks (often closed-ended) questions, thereby prompting the client to give short answers;
   - Sets the expectation that the practitioner will ask questions and the client will then answer, thus fostering client passivity.
   - This trap can get sprung inadvertently when too many specific questions are asked related to filling out forms early in treatment.
   - Consider having clients fill out questionnaires in advance, or wait until the end of the session to obtain any additional details you need. Asking open-ended questions, letting the client talk, and using reflective listening are several ways to avoid this trap.

6. “Expert” trap
   - The counselor shifts into prescriptive, problem-solving mode and tries to “fix” the client, thereby eliciting passivity and disempowerment on the part of the client;
   - When you give the impression that you have all the answers, you draw the client into a passive role rather than empowering the client.
   - In MI the client is understood to be the expert about his/her situation, values, goals, concerns, and skills. The MI practitioner seeks collaboration and gives clients the opportunity to explore and resolve ambivalence for themselves.