



## Motivational Interviewing Tips

# HOW TO LISTEN



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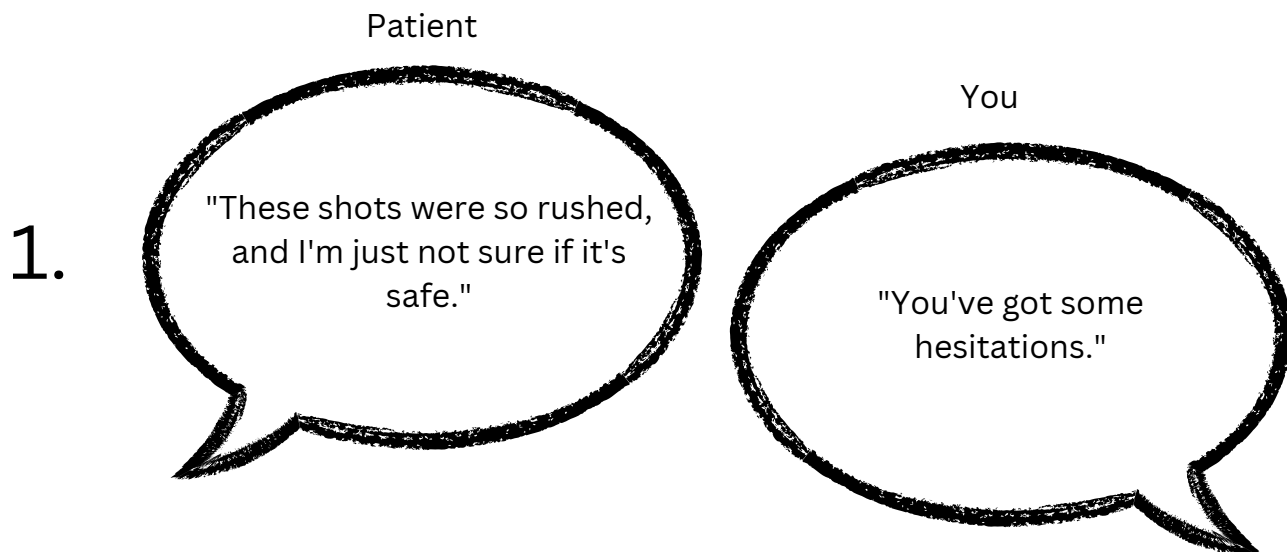


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Who do you think is a “good listener”? What are the characteristics of a good listener?

In motivational interviewing (MI), listening means paying close attention to what we say to demonstrate listening and understanding. Listening is not passive: We do not sit back and keep quiet during the entire conversation. Instead, listening is active, where we use our words to show what we are hearing, as well as to engage and connect. While there is a place for silence, it is important to express that we hear what the patient says.

Reflections (or “reflective statements”) are the primary manner in which we show that we are listening in MI. Reflections are statements that convey empathy and encourage the patient to elaborate, amplify, confirm, or correct. Below are several examples of how reflections may sound in a conversation.



When a patient expresses doubt about a recommendation (e.g., getting vaccinated), it can be easy to succumb to the “righting reflex,” where we immediately try to correct or fix their doubt. However, this approach often backfires and can leave someone feeling dismissed. While there is a place for education, responding first with a reflection will help someone feel that you have heard their concerns.

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Patient

2.

"I really need to take better care of myself. I want to be around for my grandkids."

You

"Family is really important to you."

It can be exciting when a patient starts to name their reasons for making a positive change. Resist the temptation to pounce on this by arguing that they should make the change. Reflect their reasons back to them, and they may make the argument themselves. Reflecting that “change talk” will help strengthen those feelings and build their motivation for change.

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Patient

3.

"You can't possibly understand what I'm going through. How old are you anyway?"

You

"You're wondering if talking to me would even be helpful."

Sometimes when someone poses a question, they aren't actually looking for an answer to that question. They may be expressing something else, like frustration or annoyance. In this case, “How old are you anyway?” is a way of saying: “I don't see how you could possibly help me.” Instead of getting defensive, try to go below the surface and reflect back the actual meaning.

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Patient

You

4.

"I don't want to get diabetes like my dad. But I just don't see how I can fit exercise into my life."

"On one hand it's hard to see how to fit more activity in, and on the other, you really don't want to get diabetes."

When someone is grappling with a change, ambivalence - feeling two ways about it - is perfectly normal. This response is an example of a “double-sided” reflection, where we reflect the ambivalence back to the person.

A note about double-sided reflections: People often respond to the last thing you said. If you’re at a point in the conversation where you are cultivating change talk, consider ending the reflection with the change talk.

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A final note about reflections: They are statements, not questions. Voice inflection turns down at the end. If the inflection turns up at the end, it becomes a question, which has a very different effect in the conversation. In the dynamics of language, a question requires a response; it places a demand on the other person. Reflective listening statements are statements of understanding. If you build the skill of reflective listening, you may find that your conversations start to feel less like “wrestling” and more like “dancing.”

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If you found this guide useful and would like more ideas on how to have effective helping conversations, check out our other resources at [Boost Oregon’s Motivational Interviewing page!](#)

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