

OARS in Motivational Interviewing

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“OARS” is an acronym to help you remember four basic counseling skills that are used in the engaging process, and indeed throughout the processes of motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). The letters stand for:

O Asking Open questions, instead of closed or fact-gathering questions that invite short answers and keep the client in a more passive role. Open questions encourage people to have more active involvement in the conversation, considering and elaborating on what they do mean. Unlike a cross-examining attorney, the interviewer does not know in advance how the person will answer. In motivational interviewing we encourage asking more open than closed questions, and in general the interviewer should be doing well less than half of the talking.

A Affirming involves commenting positively on a client’s strengths, attributes, efforts, and steps in a healthy direction. It is consciously looking for what is good in people, rather than focusing on shortcomings or pathology. When you affirm, people experience less need to defend their worth, and can be more open to self-examination and change.

R Reflecting is the fundamental skill of accurate empathy. With empathic listening statements, an interviewer makes a guess about what the person may mean. Simple reflections merely repeat or slightly rephrase what a person has said. Complex reflections are more skillful, and make a guess about what the person has not yet said, but may mean. A good balance is needed between the extremes of staying too close to the person’s words, and jumping too far ahead with wild guesses. In skillful reflecting, the interviewer may be “continuing the paragraph,” saying what might be the next sentence in the person’s discourse, rather than just repeating what has already been said. Although you are conscious that you are making a guess, it is usually better to offer your reflection as a statement rather than a question. Even though you don’t intend it, asking questions is more likely to evoke defensiveness. Your voice tone inflects down at the end of a statement, rather than up as in a question.

S Summarizing pulls together several things that a person has told you, helping him or her to consider it all together. Clients hear themselves talk, then hear you reflecting what they said, then may hear it again in a summary that pulls threads together. In motivational interviewing, summaries particularly pull together a client’s own change talk. Summaries can also be used to make sure you have understood well what people have told you.

The OARS are foundational interpersonal skills that facilitate clear communication and a collaborative working relationship. In motivational interviewing the OARS are also used in strategic ways to “row” in a particular direction.

References

Miller, W. R. (2018). *Listening well: The art of empathic understanding*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock.
 Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press. 1, 91-111.