

# Building Safe Moments: Non-Clinical Approaches to Mental Health

Coast Mental Health

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# Quote of the Day

“A person is a fluid process, not a fixed and static entity; a flowing river of change, not a block of solid material; a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits.”

Carl Rogers, 1961

# Before we begin, a moment of Reflection

Think back to a time when you were supporting someone who was having a really hard moment.

What was that experience like for you?

What did you find yourself wishing you had — more time, more tools, more support?

And gently, what felt challenging or didn't go the way you hoped?

# Motivational Interviewing (MI)

MI is a way of being with people that focuses upon the belief that we all have internal (intrinsic) motivation. It is a collaborative therapeutic approach designed to guide clients toward behavioral change.

(<https://positivepsychology.com/motivational-interviewing-quotes/>)

# Ambivalence

Ambivalence is feeling two conflicting things at the same time—wanting change while also feeling unsure or stuck.

MI recognizes that ambivalence is a normal part of change, not resistance. When someone is distressed, they may want change and feel unsure at the same time. Instead of pushing, MI invites us to stay curious, honour autonomy, and help the person voice their own motivations. This supports cognitive safety, preserves dignity, and helps the brain re-engage in clearer thinking.

# The Two Sides of Ambivalence: Change Talk and Sustain Talk

- Change Talk is the language of change - any client language that favours movement toward change.
- Sustain Talk is the language that favours movement towards not changing or staying the same.

Our goal as workers is to recognize the language of change that we hear in our clients and then evoke and reinforce it.

- We want to hear both parts of the ambivalence as it's coming to us, and we want to attend to one part more than the other.

# Using OARS to Gently Navigate Ambivalence



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# OARS Recap

## CORE SKILLS

For Motivational Interviewing: O.A.R.S.

### OPEN QUESTIONS

An open-ended question is one that does not have a simple, one-word, or yes/no answer. Think, "Why do you think X isn't working?" vs. "Do you think X would work?"



### AFFIRMATION

Affirm the client during MI, acknowledging their struggle and their attempts at addressing the issue. Think, "That must have been very difficult for you. Thank you for sharing that with me."

### REFLECTIVE LISTENING

After listening carefully and without judgment, practitioners then reflect back on what they have heard, but using their own words. Think, "So, I'm hearing you say that you were frustrated by X."



### SUMMARIES

By providing a summary of the clients' main ideas and summaries, practitioners can help clients gain a holistic understanding of the session and a clear path toward the discussed goals.

# Our Words Matter!

As workers, the language we use and the beliefs underneath that language directly shape the experience of the people we support.

How we talk and engage with someone can either create a sense of safety or greatly reduce it. When we approach people with curiosity instead of judgment, and describe behaviour instead of labeling it, we help preserve dignity and protect against stigma.

Small shifts in language signal big shifts in mindset: from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What’s happening for you?”; from “non-compliant” to “navigating ambivalence”; from “attention-seeking” to “connection-seeking.”

This framing not only reduces stigma — it also supports clearer thinking, strengthens trust,

# The “Righting” Reflex

Our desire to help can often get in the way if we are trying to “fix” people.

For employment counsellors, the Righting Reflex may show up as the urge to jump in with solutions without working with the person—you may re-write a resume or give advice before the person has explored their own readiness or motivations.

This instinct comes from wanting to help, but it can unintentionally increase pressure, trigger shame, or reinforce feelings of “I’m not good enough.”

When we move too quickly into fixing, the person may shut down, agree just to please, or become more ambivalent about change.

# Redefining Resistance

The word 'resistance' implies negative connotations about the person. It blames the person as if they are doing it on purpose, being difficult, or that there is something wrong with them

What we often call “resistance” is usually a mix of ambivalence, overwhelm, stigma, and the pressure created (unintentionally) when workers move too quickly.

We can “roll with resistance” by using OARS, strengths-based language, and pausing the Righting Reflex. This can help the person reconnect with their own motivation. When we shift from “Why won't they?” to “What do they need right now?” we transform resistance from a barrier into an invitation for connection, autonomy, and dignity.

# Responding to Resistance using MI

Confronting people and telling them what to do will evoke a natural pushback to that - people begin to respond to that with the other side of their ambivalence (sustain talk), to argue against change, and thereby talk themselves out of doing it.

Instead of responding to resistance by telling people why they need to change - we can focus on eliciting change talk in our interactions with them.

Create an atmosphere of safety and non-judgement  
Listen without shutting the person down  
Acceptance does not mean approval

# From What We Say → To What We See

If our words and responses matter this much, then noticing distress early - through observable changes, not labels - becomes an essential part of supporting people well.

# What is Distress?

Distress is simply a sign that someone's brain has hit its limit for now.

It's not a diagnosis- it's an invitation to slow down, offer support, and help the person regain clarity.

# How do I know if someone is in distress?

As vocational counsellors, the people you are working with may demonstrate distress as:

- difficulty concentrating, emotional dysregulation, frustration, socially avoidant behavior.
- changes in attention or concentration
- difficulty organizing thoughts
- forgetfulness that's out of character
- reduced engagement in activities
- increased frustration or withdrawal
- trouble following steps or instructions

# Creating Moments of Safety and Dignity

“Safety” includes emotional safety (feeling heard), cognitive safety (space to process), social safety (respect, no shame).

Create Safety with:

- 1) Structured check-in questions: “How are you feeling today?” “Is there something on your mind related to work or this task?”
- 2) Ground rules: confidentiality, respect, autonomy.
- 3) Enable choice and agency: let the client make the decision, set their pace, choose tasks aligned with their strengths.

# Emotion Regulation Skills and Vocational Guidance

Integrating emotion regulation skills (from DBT) helps support resilience- managing frustration, dealing with interpersonal stress, preventing burn-out.

## Vocational Counselling Interventions:

- Memory aids / external supports (checklists, visual planners) for people who struggle with working memory.
- Mini “brain breaks” during coaching or vocational training to help with cognitive fatigue.
- Role-plays or structured practice of social or workplace interactions (e.g., “If my supervisor asks me to change my task, how do I respond?”).

# Moving “Beyond the Label” through Language and Interaction

- Use person-first language - put the person before any challenge, condition, or experience they may have.  
“a person experiencing anxiety” instead of “an anxious person.”
- Be aware of internal biases: assumptions about capability, productivity, etc.

Promote Inclusive design in Vocational planning by:

- Developing job plans that play to an individual’s strengths, rather than trying to “fix” their challenges.
- Advocating within workplaces for accommodations, understanding, and flexibility.

# How to Respond Supportively in the Moment

Creating Safety and Dignity  
without using Clinical Language

# 1. Start With Presence, Not Problem-Solving

The first response isn't a skill, a tool, or a technique-  
it's simply presence.

When someone is in distress, our most powerful tool  
is how we show up -calm, grounded, and without  
judgment.

Our presence communicates safety before our words  
do.

## 2. Use Neutral, Respectful Language

Avoid “What’s wrong?” and shift to non-clinical, non-observations.

Try:

- “I’m noticing you seem a bit overwhelmed right now.”
- “I can see this moment is really heavy.”
- “Would it help if we slowed things down together?”

This keeps the focus on the moment.

# 3. Prioritize Choice

Offer small, manageable options:

- “Would you like to take a short break or stay here with me?”
- “Do you want to sit, stand, or get some fresh air?”
- “Would grounding tools help, or would you prefer a quiet moment?”

Choice reduces shame and preserves dignity.

# 4. Make the Moment Safer

A distressed brain may be overwhelmed, scattered, or shut down. You can respond by:

- Speaking slowly
- Simplifying what's happening
- Using one-step instructions
- Giving time to process

“Let’s take this one small step at a time.”

# 5. Name the Strength, not the Struggle

This reframes distress without minimizing it.

- “You’re doing the best you can right now.”
- “It took courage to say something.”
- “I’m really glad you’re here with me.”

This prevents shame and builds dignity.

# 6. Normalize the Experience (Without Minimizing It)- Validate!

People feel safer when they know their reactions make sense and that we understand (\*understanding does not mean approval\*)

Try:

- “Stress can make thinking feel foggy — that’s totally human.”

This removes stigma and avoids labels

# 7. Co-regulate in Simple, Grounded Ways

No clinical intervention required — just human regulation.

Examples:

- Model slow breathing
- Offer quiet tone and steady posture
- Suggest grounding (touching a chair, feeling feet on floor)
- Use sensory tools if appropriate
- Offer a glass of water, a seat, or a brief walk

This communicates: You're safe. You're not alone.

# Grounding Together: The Warhead Reset

The intense sour flavour activates the senses and gives the brain a strong “anchor point,” helping interrupt spirals of overwhelm, anxiety, or distress. As the sourness fades, we notice the shifts in taste, breathing, and body sensations — a reminder that emotions and sensations change, and we can ride them out.

# WARHEADS

DISCOVER THE WORLD OF SOUR CANDY FOR  
DISTRESS TOLERANCE

TASTE BUDS, GET READY! EMOTIONS, BEWARE!

Did you know that the intense flavor of a Warhead candy is exactly what the brain needs in moments of distress?

The initial shock of the sour candy works as a grounding technique, bringing you into the present moment while your brain moves away from the fear and panic. The longer you focus on the candy, the intensity of your emotion will decrease. Give it a try (if you dare!)

# Why All This Matters for Vocational Counsellors

As vocational counsellors, you often work with clients who face both cognitive and social barriers; “building safe moments” helps you meet clients where they are at- without overstepping into clinical diagnosis.

The use of non-clinical MI and DBT tools empowers you to support clients’ emotional regulation, increasing clients’ job-readiness and resilience.

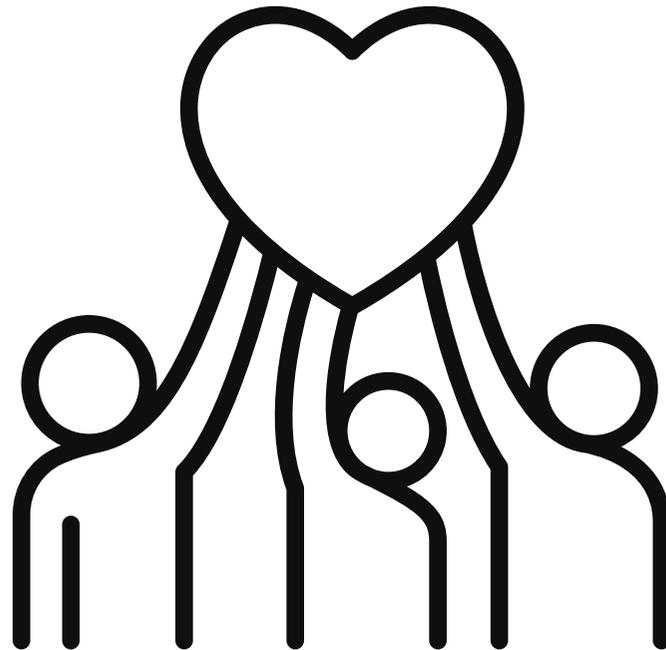
Emphasizing dignity and strength aligns with “moving beyond the label) (abilities over limitations), making the vocational counselling process more empowering.

By reducing stigma and improving communication, you help clients advocate for accommodations, leading to more inclusive workplaces.

The work you do is vital and important.

It can be difficult and rewarding.

Always remember, you are contributing to the quality of an individual's life.



# Let's Talk!

Questions, comments and/or concerns?

Do you have a situation that we can all collaborate on?

Upon reflection from the beginning, do you have situations where you would have responded differently?

# Contact Us

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# References-please see handout

# Thank You!