Talking to Change: An MI Podcast

Glenn Hinds and Sebastian Kaplan

Episode 10: Affirmations in MI, with Tim Apodaca, PhD

Sebastian Kaplan:

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to another episode of the Talking to Change: A Motivational Interviewing podcast. First, I'll introduce myself. I'm Sebastian Kaplan from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and joined with my good friend, Glenn Hinds, from Derry in Northern Ireland. Hello, Glenn.

Glenn Hinds:

Hi, Seb. Hi, everybody.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Well, today we have an excellent podcast planned for you all. We'll be joined shortly by Tim Apodaca where we'll be talking about the role of affirmation in motivational interviewing. Before we introduce Tim, Glenn, maybe you'd like to tell the audience the various ways that they can give us feedback.

Glenn Hinds:

Fantastic. For the people who follow us on Twitter or are looking to follow us on Twitter, it's @ChangeTalking. Our Facebook page is Talking to Change. And for questions or feedback or suggestions for future podcasts, the email is podcast@glennhinds.com.

Sebastian Kaplan:

We had a suggestion, did we not, a suggestion about a potential podcast around the stages of change, which was something that we hadn't quite thought of, and that's something that we certainly have in the planning stages. Comments, feedback, ideas for future episodes, we welcome it all.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Okay. Well, we'll get things going now. It is our great pleasure to have Tim on this podcast today. Tim Apodaca is a licensed psychologist and an associate professor of paediatrics at the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine. MI has been his primary career focus for the past 15 years through efforts such as implementing MI in various healthcare settings as well as studying the mechanisms of action through which MI exerts its therapeutic effects.

Sebastian Kaplan:

He's been a member of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers since 2002 and has trained a range of clinicians in settings throughout the US. In his current role as a psychologist at Children's Mercy Hospital he teaches psychology interns and medical residents how to use MI skills to address health behavior change in a medical setting. In his clinical work at the hospital, Tim treats adolescents struggling with substance use, adherence to medical treatment, as well as anxiety, depression, ADHD and other mental health disorders. He also maintains a private practice where he works with both adults and adolescents.

Sebastian Kaplan:

As a researcher, Tim has been the principal investigator on two MI-focused grants from the National Institutes of Health as well as co-investigator on several other federal grants. He has written 40 scholarly articles published in academic journals. Tim, we are very pleased to have you with us and welcome aboard.

Tim Apodaca:

Thanks, guys. Thanks for having me. I'm really thrilled to be here today. Appreciate it.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Excellent. Well, it probably makes sense just to start with the basic opener about affirmations and just to give us an opening of what is an affirmation?

Tim Apodaca:

Sure. An affirmation is generally when a counselor would say something that's positive or complimentary to the client that they're working with. It might be in a form of expressing appreciation for something that they've done, maybe appreciation for taking a risk in a therapy session or appreciation for a step toward behavior change that they might've made in between sessions.

Tim Apodaca:

It also could be a form of remarking about something that the client has done that would boost their confidence, the client confidence, affirming that they are able to make changes as well as just reinforcing. I guess reinforcing or encouraging ideas that the client comes up with or reinforcing essentially any movement toward making things better in their life for whatever it is that they're being seen for.

Glenn Hinds:

Right.

Tim Apodaca:

That seemed like a really long definition. I'm sorry.

Glenn Hinds:

No, it-

Tim Apodaca:

I kind of went on and on with that one.

Glenn Hinds:

It didn't. I suppose what it does is it offers us an opportunity over the next hour or so really to unpick the width of what it is you're describing because it sounds like it can flow from an acknowledgement of someone's efforts in the therapeutic space or even making their way to the contact with the practitioner right through to something much more profound about the emotional effort or the contribution that they've made in their attempts to be different between sessions.

Glenn Hinds:

It sounds almost like a continuum from a sense of appreciation right through to an acknowledgement of a personal asset or a characteristic or strength that belongs to them. It's that acknowledgement to the client as a means of supporting. I understood when you were describing there the confidence of the client to refer to the notion of efficacy, the client's efficacy and their own belief in themselves rather than the idea of I feel really confident as a human being. It's about the confidence to achieve a change.

Tim Apodaca:

Absolutely.

Glenn Hinds:

Right.

Tim Apodaca:

One of the things that I've noticed both in the clinical work that I do as well as supervision when I've trained providers, oftentimes I'll have them make audio tapes or recordings of their appointments, their sessions as part of the supervision, as part of my own clinical work, and also as part of research that I've done. I almost want to say the quality of the affirmations seems to matter. We notice that it's one of those situations where less is more in a way. That if a client senses that an affirmation is just an attaboy or good job or way to go and it's done repeatedly, it sort of loses its strength.

Glenn Hinds:

Right.

Tim Apodaca:

When it comes from a place of something that makes it clear that the client is truly being heard, that the provider has been attending closely to what they've said both in that moment, in that appointment, as well as in the history of their previous work together, that sense of truly being heard and acknowledged for efforts that one is making, acknowledging the difficulty, the struggle of making behavioral change that our clients are often going through, it really seems to hit home. And a lot of the focus can be on

what's wrong, what's wrong with what you're doing; what's wrong with how things are in your life; what's wrong with your mood if you're being seen for depression. By picking out or identifying these little points of light, it provides a lot of encouragement to a client in what is often a very long road toward change.

Sebastian Kaplan:

So you're bringing up a really important topic in the MI world and a topic that MI practitioners often think about and talk about, and that is basically this distinction between an affirmation and words of praise and encouragement like an attaboy and a good job. Maybe you could talk a little bit more about that distinction and why affirmations provide such a unique- there's such a unique quality in the affirmations that can be so helpful in the conversation?

Tim Apodaca:

Sure. I think one way that might help me get started in thinking about this is taking an example from outside of the therapeutic world, outside of therapy. A parent and a child are talking and the kid is working hard at school. They come home with a report card and let's say they've got all A's and one B. The parent goes through it routinely with them and, "Good. Nice. Congrats. Congrats," with each of the grades. It can seem or feel or look kind of shallow or surface-y, whereas the parent might say something like, "You know, I see you studying every day and all of the effort that you put into that. And you're doing a fantastic job and I'm really proud of you."

Tim Apodaca:

That's one way that I think about it is that affirmations aren't some magic skill that just gets used in MI or even just in therapy. It's just a part of natural language that occurs. I just think that from an MI perspective as practitioners or trainers or researchers, paying attention to how we give or receive affirmations in the real world can be hugely informative of what might be helpful in a therapeutic context.

Glenn Hinds:

So the human relationships that we have in our day-to-day lives are also manifested in the therapeutic space. What we're exploring in motivational interviewing and in other therapies is being more defined about the type of conversation, the nature of the content, the topics that are being explored, but the language that's been used is heard outside of that room as well. It's just as with motivational interviewing, we're exploring the use of open-ended questions. We're encouraging affirmations. We're encouraging reflective listening for a particular structured reason.

Glenn Hinds:

But it sounds like it's that idea of the affirmation is an appreciation of the effort an individual's making in whatever it is they're doing. It's how we word that to communicate our genuine appreciation of what it must've been like for the other person. All I'm doing is I'm noticing what you are rather than telling you who you should think yourself to be.

Tim Apodaca:

That's a great way of putting it, that I'm noticing what you're doing. I'm noticing what you are. I'm paying attention. For me, if we're talking about the quality or the depth of affirmations that we use in MI, for me that is inextricably linked to the quality of the MI spirit with which the session is being done. A lot of my research mostly involves coding audio tapes of MI sessions and we're noticing, we're paying attention to the therapeutic relationship, the qualities of empathy and the overall style and spirit of MI.

Tim Apodaca:

When a provider is high in MI spirit and empathy and the genuineness really I think of the interaction, like I'm actually very interested in what you're saying and I'm really paying attention to you, an affirmation that comes from that place can sound completely different from when I listen to somebody is doing maybe all of the skills very well, plenty of reflections and open questions and affirmations. But if it just seems like they're going through the motions, they got the skills down, but the relationship and the spirit and the empathy aren't readily apparent either to me as a supervisor or to the client who's being listened to. It's noticed. There's a huge difference in the quality of the interaction, the relationship, that has a huge influence on whether or not an affirmation is received as genuine.

Sebastian Kaplan:

I'm just curious how you glean that or notice that. When you're listening to a recording or observing one of your students or a supervisee, how do you notice that there's a lack of genuineness? If someone's using the words that make up an affirmation but there's just something missing there, how do you pick that up?

Tim Apodaca:

I think the first thing is how the client responds immediately afterwards. If it's more of a surface level type of affirmation, most of the time the immediate client response is, "Yeah," or "Thanks." Or just a one word or almost even a non-response, just a nodding of the head. Whereas if it's a deeper, more genuine affirmation, the client will often continue talking more about what they were just affirmed for because in a way... It's hard to describe. It's just in a reaction of the person who receives the affirmation.

Tim Apodaca:

If we go back to the kid with the report card with the parents just ticking through it, they might just nod their head, take the report card, and shuffle back to their room. If they receive that deeper affirmation, they might smile and climb on mom or dad's lap. It's in the reaction that you can sense whether it's being combined with that MI spirit and the quality of the connection of the relationship.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah. The connectedness part of what you're describing there with what I'm noticing in my trainings is that when we do exercises where people are invited to practice listening, just pay attention with curiosity, one of the feedbacks is about very often what happens

is when I ring the chime to bring the conversation to end, the conversations continue. I'd just be curious, what's going on in the conversation that makes both parties want to stay part of it. And more often than not, the person who's got the task of listening says, "I was just really interested." And the person who was talking says, "I felt listened to."

Glenn Hinds:

As we debrief that, universally what we discovered is that when we are being genuinely listened to, it's a felt experience. And it sounds like that's what you're describing is that that's coming across in the tapes that the person feels listened to. There's an experience that they have felt heard and they move towards the person that has connected to them at that level. Interestingly, what the practitioner can do to increase that is to choose to be interested in what the person is saying, which is what you were describing is that you're genuinely there, so you must be genuinely interested in what the other person's saying. An affirmation coming from that place, will it simply arise because you can see it or experience it in the company of someone else.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. I'm thinking of a training that I'm preparing, that I'm working on currently. It's going to be a challenge because it addresses that very issue you were just talking about. It's in a military setting here in the US and there's very distinct roles and lines that the counselor, they don't want to evoke certain information because then it becomes reportable and it creates all kinds of mess. So I'm listening to some of their practice sessions getting ready for this, and they're hitting all the buttons. There's a number of reflections. There are maybe two reflections per open question.

Tim Apodaca:

The focus is just on, I don't want to say going through the motions, but that's almost what it feels like when listening to some of this stuff. The challenge is if somebody isn't genuinely interested in or wanting to listen to or understand the person they're working with, is that a teachable or trainable skill? I don't know. I think from an MI perspective, that's a huge challenge is- people can learn the skills all they want. I don't know. That's an issue that I wrestle with.

Tim Apodaca:

I think part of it is with the medical setting that I've been working in for a number of years where the style is just completely different, let's get them going. I can get an endocrinologist to ask more open questions, but it's harder to get them to slow down and listen and genuinely attend to what's being said rather than ticking through to the next patient they've got to see. You know, Glenn, that's what came up for me when you were talking about that listening exercise that you've got is you have to start with a clinician or a counselor who is genuinely interested and concerned about the person. Otherwise, they're going to miss catching those little points of light they could possibly affirm that are actually going on in the person's life outside of the therapy room or in that moment right there.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Tim, you used the term points of light a couple of times so far. Maybe in getting at this question of authenticity around affirmations, it just made me think about a client who would come in to a therapist or a patient to see a physician and if they're coming in describing some of the challenges that they're experiencing or they come in with their head down dejected. They haven't followed through or they're still struggling with their weight or whatever it might be.

Sebastian Kaplan:

And if that provider, rather than lecturing on well, you really got to buckle down and join the gym or you really have to do your homework or whatever it is, if that provider kind of turns the tables a bit and makes a comment about the light that is there as opposed to all the problems that are there, that's a sign that the person is really paying close attention not just to the words but also to, I guess, the underlying values that that person possesses and what the strengths that that person might possess. That might be a signal that okay, that is a genuine affirmation as opposed to someone just going through the motions.

Tim Apodaca:

Absolutely. That brings to mind a young man that I'm working with currently. He's just graduated high school and he was referred to me for poor adherence to manage type I diabetes. It's a terrible disease to have to manage. For a teenager, it's very, very difficult, takes a lot of effort, and makes you different than everybody else. They referred this person to me because Tim does motivational interviewing; let's see if he can motivate him to take better care of his diabetes. That was the presenting problem and there's some concerns about depression and all that.

Tim Apodaca:

Then that got better. We were able to work on the adherence and the behaviors that needed to happen for that. But the theme that had been emerging while we did that that I was paying attention to in the background was wanting independence and being terrified of independence all at the same time. In a recent session, we were talking about he has been wanting to get a job and get his driver's license for months and he hasn't done so. When we were talking today about it, he was getting dejected and kind of getting resigned to things and avoiding, as his tendency seems to be.

Tim Apodaca:

I said something along the lines of, "You know, it might feel like a huge mountain to climb to figure out how to do this. You're trying to register for college courses. You're trying to find a job and you don't know how to do any of this stuff." I said, "But just a couple of months ago you felt like managing your diabetes was impossible. You had been hospitalized because it had gotten so bad and look where you're at now. How do you feel now physically and with your health?" I was trying to affirm this success and the effort that he had made in this other arena of his life and use that to build his confidence that yes, maybe I can overcome this challenge as well.

Tim Apodaca:

I think that's what was coming to my mind when you were asking about the points of light. Because we were in this very frustrating appointment, this frustrating session. He was getting dejected. He was kind of shutting down a little bit. The point of light was man, you're kicking your diabetes' butt and three months ago it was kicking yours. It turned around the tone of the appointment and he became reengaged and was starting to talk about, "Well, maybe I could do this little thing to move toward it."

Glenn Hinds:

It sounds like one of the things you were able to do was help him not to take for granted the success that he'd made and bring it to the fore and then build, use that energy of success to consider what else to do. That you reintroduced with the affirmation some momentum based on the success that had already taken place.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. Something that I don't know why I had not thought of this before, I mean I've been doing MI for whatever it is, 15 years now, just recently in the last few months when I think about the importance and the confidence scales or any kind of one to 10 scale that we use, a lot of times my clients at least, they tend to focus on how much further there is still to go as opposed to how much I've done. I'm a visual person. A lot of my clients are teenagers. Got a big whiteboard on the wall. I'll just go draw a line, like this is where I started and over here is where I want to be, whatever the behavior is or even if it's becoming more independent, which is not a behavior; it's almost a quality.

Tim Apodaca:

Where were you at then? Okay. Put a mark right here where you're at now. Okay, and this is where you want to go. It's almost like the question when you do the confidence ruler with somebody MI where you say, "Why are you a six and not a one?" Without doing it in that structured of a way that I just said, I've been using that concept more with my clients and I affirm how far they've come. Over time, they seem to start being able to self-affirm more if the attention is redirected on well, look what you've done.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Right. It also, it doesn't seem to discount the struggles that someone's having. So the young man that you were working with who hadn't gotten his license, that's still a reality of his life and there's still things that are in the way. But the affirmation that you used there was done in service of maybe reminding him that he's overcome huge barriers and that's a quality within himself.

Sebastian Kaplan:

That's a strength that he possesses that he can bring to any challenge in his path, whether it's the license or something else. But it's not dismissive. It's not, "Oh, don't worry about that. You're doing fine." It's, "Well, you've made this major achievement," and the invitation to consider how that whatever he used in terms of a strength for the challenge before could benefit him in the challenge ahead.

Tim Apodaca:

Absolutely. Just a few weeks ago I had given him an assignment between appointments to start writing a list of successes. What have you done, big or small, you would consider a success? He came back with a list the next week with something as big as graduating high school a year early. That was a big deal and something as small as learning to skip a rock. It helped us to create a language together of acknowledgement of the abilities and the good things that he is able to do to build steam for the next challenges that he has to face. That's part of what I meant by the self-affirmation. I think that the genuine affirmations that a person receives in a therapeutic setting, one, a client, a person, a patient can learn to notice more themselves the good things that are going on, the abilities that they do have, that challenges that they're able to overcome.

Tim Apodaca:

When we're talking about the issue of authenticity or genuineness or basically a good quality affirmation versus kind of a surface one, something that I try to do and I also very, very much try to instil this is trainees or supervisees is when we use MI to elicit a person's goals and values, which is a strategy that's designed to elicit change talk and motivation to change, time and again you can come back to some of those values that the person has. And a simple statement about that value can carry a lot of weight. It's one of those less is more things.

Tim Apodaca:

Somebody who is struggling to overcome lifelong resentment of their parents for the way they were raised, they feel like they're never going to be able to let go of that and it's always going to hang over their life. If somebody has identified a value, even it wasn't explicitly, if you notice a value that somebody has, an affirmation of ‘you are so determined. When you set your mind to something, you make sure it gets done.’

Tim Apodaca:

I just find the role of values in MI and developing an ear for listening for those and then holding them and knowing that they're there and not necessarily reflecting it back immediately. But when that moment is there and it's relevant and the person needs to hear it, that's where I think some of the art of doing MI comes in. Maybe it's been discussed a while back but they're not thinking of it in this context. I think just paying attention to and listening for and just attending to the values and what's truly important to people in their lives, just acknowledging what that value is and affirming that value in the person in my experience seems to carry a lot of depth and a lot of weight for that person.

Glenn Hinds:

So again, it sounds like you're describing almost rather than a continuum lengthwise, it's a continuum depth-wise in relation to how an affirmation may sound when you're describing someone coming in and having learned to skip a rock. That by exploring with them, how did you go about doing that, you'll hear characteristics, you'll hear strengths, you'll hear talents that were necessary to achieve that. And then we can be curious, so

how can you use those skills and talents that have helped you learn to skip a rock to help you to manage your diabetes, perhaps?

Glenn Hinds:

But also then at a deeper level it's about sense of integrity or effort or determination that it's almost like the drivers that make this individual who they are that helps them achieve the throwing the rock, but they use skills on top of these values. These talents are driven by these values. And by paying attention and being aware of these values, then my guess is then the person's going to feel much more connected to the practitioner who can observe and experience those aspects of them in any conversation.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah, absolutely. You mentioned the skipping of the rock. Maybe on a smaller level or a less deep level I might ask them how they did it, and it turns out I asked grandpa to show me how to do it. I tried it for three weeks on their farm and I couldn't get it to do it. Okay, so asking for help even when you were embarrassed to ask so that using the success or the affirmation to then explore strategies or ways of going about solving a new problem.

Tim Apodaca:

But then with the values on the deeper level, when listening for what's important to a person or more explicitly sometimes maybe through an exercise like a values clarification exercise with the values card sort, when we get a person to identify their values, they're stating either something that they really like about themselves or something that they really aspire to. By the nature of one of those two things, that lends itself to something we can affirm in the person. Because when we identify values with someone, they're identifying the best in them or the best that they aspire to. Again, whether it's through a structured exercise to identify values or whether it's listening for those themes, reflecting them, asking about them.

Tim Apodaca:

"It seems like being true to your word is something that's really important to you." Well, yeah, because I think honesty... That helps us to clarify back something that's really important to them. We can use that down the road later in the appointment, three weeks from now. "You told me before that honesty is really important to you and I notice how even though it was really hard, you stood up to your boss and things actually got better around there." There's an affirmation built around a value that you might not have known about it until just a couple of weeks earlier. I don't know if that makes sense.

Sebastian Kaplan:

No, it totally does. There are actually a couple of different things I'm wanting to react to. One was Glenn, your idea of a continuum of depth. And from the point of view of a trainee or maybe a seasoned clinician that's listening to this episode right now and thinking well, how can I use affirmations in my practice? To go back to the rock skipping example, a more shallow, maybe not ineffective, but a more shallow comment about

that person's rock skipping efforts might be simply about skipping rocks. And it might be about you really learned how to skip rocks today or over the weekend. But getting deeper and talking about or naming the determination-

Tim Apodaca:

Persistence.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, persistence, determination, that that is something that is broader than... The rock skipping is just a launching point to identify and recognize and consider the idea of determination or persistence that could then take you into other parts of the person's life, and that would be considered a much deeper statement or a deeper affirmation, if you will.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Also, I wouldn't want people to come away with the idea that well, everything has to be this really sort of deep values-based thing. It's perfectly fine to say, wow, the kid said, "Hey, came in and I learned to skip a rock," and to celebrate that some. That's perfectly fine too, but to find these moments where you can kind of get deeper and identify things like determination and persistence can just move the discussion in a really rich way.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. I love having this conversation with you guys. I hadn't thought about it in the terms that you're describing now that the range or the continuum. As I was listening to you, I was thinking that perhaps those, I don't know, I don't want to call them a simple affirmation, like a simple reflection, but more of a, "You did a good job with this." That's specific. It's maybe not the deeper value-based one, but perhaps those type of affirmations function to praise recent or immediate progress or gains, to encourage continuing to do that thing.

Tim Apodaca:

And maybe those deeper reflections that involve values, perhaps those are most useful in building confidence to face a new challenge that they're feeling kind of dark about or discouraged about. That perhaps we don't need to go to a values-based thing because they learned to skip a rock, but if they're afraid they're going to bail out of college and so they're hiding in their dorm room and they won't go anymore, then maybe that's when we need to pull out the determination affirmation. Maybe they function differently.

Glenn Hinds:

Right. So in some ways it sounds like you work very hard and it sounds like skipping rocks is really important to you to the point where you were determined to master it over

the weekend and you were a success. You're quite a determined person, so I'm wondering how you might use your determination when it comes to coming out of your dorm room.

Tim Apodaca:

Exactly.

Glenn Hinds:

Right, right.

Tim Apodaca:

Exactly. My almost, I guess, obsessive in a way interest in therapeutic process and what happens in the moment-to-moment exchange, the thing with affirmations for me from a professional point where I really got very interested started with a research study where I wasn't planning to look at that thing. I don't know if that's something that we want to talk about.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Sure. We'd love to hear about it.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah.

Tim Apodaca:

Okay. I became interested in when to use different micro-skills. When I say micro-skill, I mean an individual therapist's behavior such as affirm or an open question or a complex reflection. I said, "Let's see if we can take a look at the individual behaviors that make up MI-consistent behaviors." Those things included affirm, emphasizing control, open questions, affirmations, giving advice with permission, a reframing, support statement. There's a list of, I don't know, eight or nine different MI behaviors that are recommended or prescribed. There were only four of those that individually predicted change talk within the session.

Tim Apodaca:

Complex reflections, in my trainings and my supervision, I've worked so hard to make sure people knew how to do complex reflections, and they're hard for people to learn. They're hard for people to do. Well, complex reflections accounted for 7% of the variance of change talk, meaning 7% of what can be understood about why or how change talk emerged came from open questions, I'm sorry - complex reflections. Open questions was 8%. Affirm accounted for 19%, nearly 20% of the variability of the amount of change talk. I thought, well, that's odd. Let me go back and look at how often were the therapists doing this.

Tim Apodaca:

They were asking open questions 34, 35 times per session on average. Reflections were 35, 36. And there were only, on average, seven affirmations per session. That just fascinated me. How can it be something that's only done a few times in the course of the session really predict and elicit the amount of change talk you're going to get from the client or the patient? It just piqued my interest and it made me respect the role of affirmations much more so than I had before.

Glenn Hinds:

Your curiosity about how a motivational interview was working led you to dig deeper and deeper into the elements of motivational interviewing, which led you to discover the significant influence that an affirmation has in relation to predicting change talk and potentially change behavior. So in some ways it sounds like an affirmation of itself, if we were to think of the toolbox, that affirmations in themselves may represent one of the most powerful tools available to us in our interventions with people. And therefore, something that we can be interested in is how often am I or my students or the people I'm working with using the most powerful tool available to them to bring about a meaningful change for the client?

Tim Apodaca:

Absolutely. I think even though I had been doing motivational interviewing for years at that point and I'd been trained as a trainer for, I think, three years already by the time I even designed that study and Bill Miller was my mentor, it's like I knew MI pretty well, but I thought affirmations, okay, it's a nice little pat on the back. It's a little compliment. Complex reflections, that's where it's at. I guess I didn't respect the role of affirmations is probably the best way to put it, until the data told me otherwise.

Sebastian Kaplan:

I imagine that listeners and MI learners will gravitate to MI for different reasons. Some just sort of naturally connect with the style and the spirit. Some might really work in settings that don't afford them hour-long conversation times with clients or patients, and they want something that's a brief intervention. Okay, so MI suits them. I imagine for others it's really searching for evidence-based skills or evidence-based interventions.

Sebastian Kaplan:

That piece of information there, the idea that affirmations above complex reflections and above open-ended questions, that produced twice as much change talk, I imagine that could be for some a really eye opening and important piece of information there. So I just want to really appreciate you bringing that up.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. I think to one of your points that in some settings we may only have one interaction with a person. We may not have repeated interactions and we may not have long interactions with them. So perhaps that idea of listening for and catching or even asking about the person's values to try to come with some of those deeper affirmations,

another strategy that works is over time with different patients and different commonalities that are going to come out.

Tim Apodaca:

If somebody just sees people for diabetes or somebody is a caseworker who works the families who are foster families, over time the kinds of themes or values that a lot of people in that situation might have can absolutely still be used as an affirmation that's very deep even if it's a one-time interaction such as, "Other people in this kind of situation told me sometimes that kindness is something that is extremely important to them, and I'm really hearing that from you right now." It's really that warmth that you feel toward other humans that inspires you to continue to take these kids into your home who constantly cause problems, but it's because you value kindness.

Tim Apodaca:

That person maybe hasn't said it and maybe you've only known them for 10 minutes, but 50 other clients you've seen or heard that from, you can use it in that way.

Glenn Hinds:

So it's the nature of the type of people who would be doing that type of behavior that potentially you can - not so much generalize, but bring into the conversation understanding there's a likelihood that it's kindness or compassion or caring for other people or the willingness to make sacrifice for the wellbeing of kids that you're prepared to give time of yourself because you want to help people.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. And I think how it's said is important. Because if you were to say in that same situation, "You got to have a kind heart to work with these kinds of kids."

Glenn Hinds:

Right, right.

Tim Apodaca:

Very different effect. I think one of the biggest things that I learned and I'm ever grateful to Bill Miller for is that sense of genuine curiosity about the other person and being able to take a possibility. "You know, other people have told me this. I wonder if that's maybe what's going on here." The way that you approach the very same thing, perhaps that value of kindness or generosity, it's not going to be received as an affirmation if you just say, "Yeah, you got to have a kind heart to do this kind of stuff, don't you?"

Tim Apodaca:

I mean, I'm being a bit dismissive in how I'm doing it to make the point, the same topic, the same idea, the same attempt at an affirmation might come across very differently. And the best way as always for us to know whether it's helpful or not is that immediate

response from the client or the patient. Do they brighten up? Do they keep talking? Do they seem more enthused, or do they just nod and go, "Yeah"?

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yes. This is really important because you're beginning to describe or continuing to describe really what the structure of an affirmation statement is. In some of the examples, for instance, it's quite clear they often start with or certainly include the word you, meaning that this is a statement that is about the other person.

Tim Apodaca:

Right.

Sebastian Kaplan:

As opposed to a statement that starts with the word I, I'm proud of you or I think that was really good of you to do. The emphasis isn't on the I. It's the emphasis is on the other person. That seems to be something in all the examples that you've thrown in there today in the conversation is the emphasis on the other person.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Even in that statement there too about you got to have a good heart to do this sort of work, that starts with you, but something that seemed deviant, I suppose, from an affirmation is that it came from a place more of the practitioner knowing and telling the other person, "Oh, by the way, I know something here about having a good heart and let me tell you about that." Which doesn't really emphasize the other person. An affirmation as far as the structure of the statement, it really needs to emphasize the other person first and foremost in a strength or a value or quality that they possess.

Tim Apodaca:

Right. It's sort of like the generic you versus the you that I'm seeing and being with right now. In a way, that's what keeps the affirmation that I was describing that might be based on repeated experiences of clients in similar situations, what keeps it from becoming just being a stereotype about you types of people is the fact that it's being noticed and floated out there as a possibility with genuine curiosity. I wonder if that what's going on here as opposed to everybody in your situation, whatever. Do you see what I'm saying?

Glenn Hinds:

Sure.

Tim Apodaca:

It's like the difference between exploring with curiosity, wow, I wonder if this is true for you, as opposed to all of you people are like this.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Also, it's not done in a definitive way either, right. Sometimes people have asked me in trainings or commented that they worry that an affirmation feels like an interpretation. To me, the distinction there is an interpretation is more of a statement of fact that I as the practitioner has decided fits you. And the way you're describing an affirmation, there's a lighter quality to it. It's like, there's a chance I'm off base here, but this is something that I think I'm noticing about you. And there's a spoken or unspoken invitation for them to chew on that a little bit and think about it and maybe counter it, but it's not a heavy-handed statement that's, this is who you are. It's a curious kind of wondering about the other person.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. And that's one of the things that I love working with teenagers is if I float something out there that's not accurate, they're going to let me know. If I'm trying to pull a quality like, let's say, being committed to relationships in the service of maybe trying to get them to apply that to repairing some of the damage in a relationship with their parents that their marijuana use has caused, in that context I might hear them say something about an interaction with a friend. And I might be thinking, okay, maybe I can build on this relationship importance, and I perhaps might say something like, "It seems really important to you to be a good friend and be true to your word."

Tim Apodaca:

That might feel like an interpretation to somebody, like one of your trainees, but what teens... "Oh, hell no. I just wanted to get a ride home from the movies." If you're wrong, most people are going to let you know. That's what I love about teens. They're a constant opportunity to learn.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah. That auto-correct, perhaps, that many of us will recognize in our client interactions, that's the client's effort to help us understand. They're giving us information to help us understand and that by them auto-correcting, it's not that you got it wrong in a critical way or a negative way. It was just that your reflection just didn't fit what they meant. Then they give you new information so that you came back online because they wanted you back online.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. I think we have to as clinicians and practitioners, we have to rely on that inherent human desire and drive to be known, to be understood. If we float something that's wrong, we just have to trust that most people don't want to be misunderstood and misinterpreted. They want to be understood. I love the auto-correct there, Glenn. That's a great way to put it.

Glenn Hinds:

Cool, cool. As we've been talking for the last couple of minutes, one of the things that's been coming into my head and I just want to throw it out there before we move on is it's almost like the spirit of motivational interviewing has a tone to it and the sound of the

voice that people can identify the authenticity of the intervention in the tone of the person who's speaking. I haven't developed that any further. I'm going to go away and think about that, that compassion has a sound or a tone to it. Authenticity has a tone to it that's different from just being practiced.

Tim Apodaca:

I agree with that. I was thinking of one of the best metaphors or ideas that really drove that home for me of the importance of that aspect of MI spirit was one of the first MI trainings that I experienced was I was just observing Terri Moyers, who's a master trainer. I was observing her for a couple of her trainings and she was explaining to this group the concept of the MI spirit. These were nurses that she was training and it felt, I haven't done my job if I don't leave the room and they've agreed to something. What Terri said was, "You want to approach it like, you know, this is just a plate of cookies I'm putting out here for you. I'm offering them to you. I don't care if you take one or that you take one. I just care that you consider it."

Tim Apodaca:

That happened earlier today with the kid who thought I was going to judge him about his marijuana use. I said, "I'm not going to tell you whether smoking twice a month as opposed to every day, if that's the right thing for you. I don't know. I'm just meeting you today. I mean, I know that you told me that that helps you to cope with the distress and the memories of all of the fighting that your parents used to do. I just care about whether you feel like that's something that is important for you to keep doing or to take a look at maybe doing differently."

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. I mean the tone, I think when you said the tone, that's what came to mind about the cookie thing. It's not take a cookie. It's just hey, it's there and I'm here to abide with you. I think just abiding through the process with somebody.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, no. It's a great image. I think you're right, Glenn, about the tone and there's just something about it. It's just a more casual approach to things that doesn't carry with it the weight of expertise and I'm lecturing you or I'm telling you what to do. It's just a plate of cookies. There's just a lighter quality to it.

Tim Apodaca:

Right. There's a group of researchers in Washington state. Zac Imel, I-M-E-L, is one of the group. I've read a little bit of their work but they're not studying MI per se but language more generally. They're starting to identify things like, I'm maybe getting a word wrong, but I think it's prosody, P-R-O-S-I-D-I-T-Y. It has something to do with the fluidity of language, how naturally it flows.

Sebastian Kaplan:

It's like the song quality of language. Yeah, yeah. Prosody.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Prosody, thank you. I think studying and analyzing sort of expert level interactions like that and then they're creating like crazy machine learning models to then essentially automatically code and identify elements of language that aren't even the words that are being used. It's what'd you say, the flow? So there are people that are looking at that stuff. That's definitely outside my realm of understanding at this point, but there's something to it and people are trying to understand it.

Glenn Hinds:

You mentioned there as well different types of affirmations that you might use with different populations. Well, I'm just wondering, do you find that when you're working with teenagers that the affirmations that you're offering might be framed differently than the affirmations you would offer an adult population?

Tim Apodaca:

I think that in a way yes, because of what my teenage patients have taught me about reflections informs how I approach affirmations with them. Simple reflections, just a simple restatement of what a person has said, with adults most of the time that works just to keep the conversation going, keep them talking about what they just said. But I'll tell you what, you try to do two or three of those in the course of one appointment with a teenager, in my experience, after the second or third one they're going to be, "That's what I just said." It's that almost more the concrete thinking about it is that doesn't work. You're just repeating what I'm saying.

Tim Apodaca:

I think with the way I apply that to affirmations is a simple reflection perhaps, that a parallel with the affirmations might be something that's more of a platitude. ‘I've heard that from teachers. My parents have told me that a million times.’ That's just something that adults say to teenagers as opposed to the deeper noticing and listening we were talking about earlier. I think that's where we have to really focus more on the idea that perhaps sometimes less is more. Maybe saying one really powerful affirmation in a 40 minute appointment is more impactful than saying five that they just flow right off their back because I hear that all the time.

Glenn Hinds:

Right. But it sounds like that that idea that kids or teenagers will be reactive to simple reflections, and I just want to know, are you saying then that they're more responsive if we're to use reflective listening with a teenage population, that they're more responsive to the more complex reflections in a conversation or is it that you simply find yourself not using reflections that often with a teenage population?

Tim Apodaca:

No. I would say specifically that yeah, I tend to try to use more complex reflections. And if I don't know enough about them yet or there's not enough information in what they've said for me to be able to generate a complex reflection, then you can never go wrong

with an open question. In terms of the whole process of change with MI, our research group is seeing, and others have as well, that reflections tend to elicit a certain amount of change talk. And the same amount tends to come from open questions. But yeah, with teens, I just don't use as many simple reflections if they're reacting badly to them.

Glenn Hinds:

It's almost like that as a teenager, their experience in the world is that they're currently less visible than the adult population, whereas when they meet a practitioner, an individual who can offer a complex reflection or that deeper affirmation, the communication is I can see you. And the kid experiences themself being really got.

Tim Apodaca:

Absolutely.

Glenn Hinds:

And that's what makes the conversation more attractive and makes them potentially come towards the practitioner in a way that's really meaningful for the young person themselves.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. I absolutely agree with that, Glenn. I have found that motivational interviewing, it's just incredibly well received by teenagers, and it's because of what you just said is that it helps us get into an interaction with a teen that is different from 99% of the other interactions they have with adults. It's like they're equals. It's the whole MI collaboration autonomy. If that's happening in MI, the teens perk up like, "Oh, you're actually listening and treating me with respect and giving my opinions some value here. Okay, yeah. I'll talk to you more." It's showing respect and they just don't get a whole lot of that.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah. And they do crave it for sure. It's also I feel like teenagers, one of the things they're so attuned to are who in their world are genuine, who's fake, who's not fake? There's so much discussion about that sort of thing between teenagers and who can they trust at some level too. I agree, MI provides such a wonderful opportunity for practitioners of any kind to really connect with them at a level that they're craving.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. The hypocrisy detector on teens is so highly attuned. I was doing an intake with a teenage kid today and after the parents left the room, one of their treatment goals for him had been to increase honesty and to improve communication. I don't know, about 10, 20 minutes into our one-on-one time with him, and he said, "And this thing about them telling me not to lie," and he used a word that I probably shouldn't repeat here.

Tim Apodaca:

But he said, "They lie all the time." And he points out multiple examples and he goes, "How can they tell me... " So yeah, it's the genuineness versus, I guess, the placating approach. I just find teens endlessly fascinating in how engaged they will become if they're just treated with respect like their voice matters. I try to use good MI skills and treat them and approach them with respect, and they respond.

Tim Apodaca:

I wanted to say something about the affirmation piece with regards to that as well. I was thinking about that today when I was doing a particularly challenging initial appointment intake session with a 16-year-old and his two parents. It had been a really heavy, intense kind of an hour or more of disappointment with all four of us in the room, the teenage patient and the two parents. The parents were divorced about a year, fairly lengthy history of verbally abusive, sometimes physically abusive. And yet there was just a real tension and a heaviness in the room.

Tim Apodaca:

I just acknowledged, "Guys, I got to say, after everything that you've talked to me about, which I'm sure is just the tip of the iceberg, but what you've been through, the fact that you're both willing to be here in this room together today," I said, "I have to imagine that's incredibly uncomfortable for both of you. And yet," and I turned to the teen. And I said, "To me, this just shows how much concern and care they have for you and that they want the best for you." The kid who'd been staring at the floor with the hair hanging over his eyes, he pulls his head up and he looks at me. Then he looks at each of them and you could just feel the weight of this tension that had been there.

Tim Apodaca:

Then mom turned to the kid and she said, "You know, honey," and then she said something very positive and loving toward him. I wasn't intending to be doing motivational interviewing at that moment, but I had the sense that there was so much tension and conflict that they were about on the verge of not wanting to continue with this. It was sort of at a boiling point. Perhaps if I were doing MI, maybe my target behavior would've been engage in therapy because it really was needed in that situation, but just acknowledging the willingness to tolerate something awful is an affirmation, at least it felt like one in that moment. I don't know. I wanted to mention that because it was just kind of unusual experience of an affirmation.

Glenn Hinds:

You sound really dedicated to what you're doing, and it sounds like you really value the opportunity to offer individuals or families who are struggling with circumstances the opportunity to navigate a new path in the company of somebody who is working really hard to understand what it must be like to be them. It sounds like that really lights you up when you have that opportunity.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. Also, another thing that I changed in the way that I practice because of the geeky side of me with the research and my newfound respect for affirmations a while back, I didn't used to do this when I did intakes with families, and I didn't used to ask about positive qualities. Then I started thinking about it like, we're just sitting here talking about all the bad stuff. Why would this kid want to change anything? Everybody's just sitting around here bashing on him. So I started asking toward the end before the parents left and I reengaged with the kid, what would you say are some of the best qualities that your son possesses? What do you admire about him?

Tim Apodaca:

They'll smile and they'll list creative, funny, loving, warm. He's got a heart the size of Montana and make friends easily, intelligent. They start rattling these things off and the mood turns. And we can separate before I just meet with the kid on a positive note of there's a lot more good here than there is bad. It seems to function to instil hope on the part of both the parent and the kid that okay, there is a lot that's going right here. It's not just this one thing that we've been hammering on for the last hour. I don't know, I think it opens up a deeper level of engagement than otherwise would be when I didn't used to do it. It makes a big difference.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah. Wondering if you have any new projects that you've begun, any new interests related to MI or certainly related to affirmations since that's our topic today?

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. I'm really excited about this study that we're writing up right now that it's not specific to affirmations. It's specific to MI, but it's gotten myself and my collaborators talking and thinking a lot about affirmations and values and goals, essentially looking at a lot of the positive aspects of what's going on in a person's life as opposed to again, the negative, the behavior change, looking at the why I'm a six instead of a 10 rather than a six instead of a one. We examined about a hundred individual MI sessions from these college students, heavy drinking college students. There were a number of different elements or what we refer to or think of as components of MI. It was the structure, basically, and it included sort of a rapport building component where they would review what had happened, the event that led them to be there.

Tim Apodaca:

The therapist would lead them through a pros and cons discussion of their drinking, so a decisional balance kind of thing. They would talk about social influences, whether it was family, parents. These were all designed to increase motivation. Then they were given a feedback report where their view was compared to others. Then we had a section where they would envision the future and they'd be asked to talk about or think about how do you think things will look or how do you want things to look if you continue the way they are now and then how they might look if you make some of these changes. Then they had a plan for change.

Tim Apodaca:

What we found fascinated us. We thought that the change plan was going to be where the action was. We found that the component, the part of the MI session that had the highest level, the highest amount of change talk was envision the future where they were looking ahead. They were thinking about the positive stuff. Almost 60% of their language was about changing in that section as opposed to with the feedback section it was maybe 20% of it was change talk. So envision the future, looking at the positive aspects of again values, goals, aspirations, elicited the most change talk. Then the language, the change language, the commitment from that specific section was the most predictive of their drinking outcomes six and 12 months later.

Tim Apodaca:

It's got us thinking about affirmations, about strength-based approaches, about the importance of values and goals in motivational interviewing. That's something that I'm really excited about because research is gruelling. Research can be boring. Research can be dull. So for me, I've always had to really care about what I'm researching. It's always been of interest to me, how is this going to inform patient care? How is this going to change the way I treat my patients and how I can train other people to treat patients?

Tim Apodaca:

Breaking it down to these micro levels has helped us to begin to look at some of those things, and that's where this finding and the respect for affirmations first came from. I'm really excited about that project and just, I think again continuing to focus on the values, the goals, the aspirations, and the moment by moment affirmations we can offer to our patients.

Sebastian Kaplan:

That envisioning exercise, you can see how that could apply in just a range of clinical settings, right. You could certainly see a lengthy discussion about the future over the course of a one-hour session. I could also imagine a physician who's got patients waiting in the waiting room for them. They're backed up already and they're having a conversation about medication.

Sebastian Kaplan:

The physician asks a question like, "How would taking this medicine help you in the future? How would you want it to help you in the future?" Just a small addition to a conversation that won't take that much time, but it gets a person thinking less about the stuff that's wrong with them or the things they're trying to get rid of and more focused on what they're aspiring towards.

Tim Apodaca:

Absolutely. I think tying it even more specifically to a timeframe helps people to be more concrete and to think more clearly about it. Maybe in your example, in three months' time, how might you feel differently or better than you do now if you're able to take this

medicine regularly? Then they're talking about playing with the grandkids and being able to go golfing again instead of the side effects and I got to take it every day. And I can't believe that I've got this disease.

Glenn Hinds:

Whether it's change talk or simply a more optimistic sound coming out of their mouth, it in itself has a benefit in the conversations.

Tim Apodaca:

Yeah. I love it. I love it too because for me, I've noticed a well-placed affirmation, a genuine affirmation with a teenage patient, it's almost like it makes them bloom. They open up. They make eye contact. It's like providing water to a plant that has been starved of water. It's like, yes. It's almost a magical thing when it happens.

Glenn Hinds:

It's clear that you really enjoy that. It sounds like that you are in their joy with them, that you're experiencing that with them, and that that's really important to you.

Tim Apodaca:

Absolutely, yeah.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah, cool.

Tim Apodaca:

Absolutely.

Glenn Hinds:

We could continue to let the sun shine and water this conversation. For the purpose of the podcast, it's unfortunate that we are going to have to start drawing it to a close. We always offer our guests, Tim, if they're open to it, to invite anyone who's listening to the podcast the opportunity to maybe speak directly or contact you directly. If that was okay, how would people go about contacting you or finding out more about Tim Apodaca and his research and practice of affirmations?

Tim Apodaca:

Absolutely. I would love that. Would be more than happy to. As you can tell, once you get me started on some of these topics, it's hard to turn me off. The best way for people to reach me would be just to email me directly. And I'm more than happy to go ahead and just provide that right now.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah, please.

Tim Apodaca:

It's my first and middle initial and my last name, so it's T-R-A-P-O-D-A-C-A-@-C-M-H-.-E-D-U. That's T-R-A-P-O-D-A-C-A-@-C-M-H-.-E-D-U. That's the email that I see every day. I'd love to hear from your listeners.

Glenn Hinds:

Fantastic. Thank you. And just to confirm our contact on Twitter, it's @ChangeTalking. Facebook, it's Talking to Change, and email is podcast@glennhinds.com.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Tim, thanks so much. This has been a great conversation, lots of wonderful things to compute and to think about, and hopefully it'll really enrich people's practices that are listening to us. So thank you so much.

Tim Apodaca:

Thank you, guys. I really enjoyed it.

Glenn Hinds:

Thanks, Tim. See you, Seb.

Tim Apodaca:

Bye. All right.

Sebastian Kaplan:

All right, Glenn. We'll see you next time.

Glenn Hinds:

Cheers.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Bye, everybody.