

Motivational Interviewing in Groups

Study notes on Wagner and Ingersoll (2013)

Source	Phases	Use it
Wagner & Ingersoll	Four	Planning or leading groups

Notes compiled by Jesse Jonesberg.

Guiding principles for MI group leaders

Participation	Make the most of members' participation.
Ownership	Encourage members to own their change.
Both sides	Explore positive and negative experiences.
Collaboration	Build cohesion and teamwork.
Relevance	Shape content around members' experiences and interests.
Direction	Empathic and focused on possible solutions.

Strategies

- Draw out participation and link themes across members.
- Limit leader talk.
- Emphasize autonomy and avoid the expert role.
- Coach and model OARS.
- Set expectations: respect others' choices and own your own.
- Focus on change: develop discrepancy, build self-efficacy, draw out change talk.

The authors compare leading an MI group to conducting a symphony: each member plays their own instrument, and the leader gently guides how they come together.

Principles of MI groups

- Focus on positives: confidence, momentum, goals and values.
- Bring members into the moment: "in here," not just "out there."
- Hear complaints without fishing for grievances. Roll with defensiveness.
- Broaden perspectives and look toward the future.

- Reflect desires, needs and plans (DARN CATS); reframe negative motivators.
- Members can build each other's self-efficacy.

Spirit and skills in a group

Language	Avoid labels and clinical terms. Keep it simple.
Autonomy	Redirect heavy advice-giving; build “ask before advising” into the ground rules.
Affirmations	Low-key, genuine and specific. Skip the cheerleading.
Reflections	Short, even one or two words, for impact.
Summaries	Link topics, focus the talk, summarize the process.

Directing conversational traffic

Depth	Deepen with reflections of values and emotions. Lighten with summaries, shifting focus, linking or humor.
Breadth	Broaden with linking summaries, open questions, double-sided reflections, metaphors, EPE. Narrow with selective reflections and closed questions.
Momentum	Speed up with open questions, complex reflections, affirmations and brainstorming. Slow down with a structured activity, a secondary theme, or exploring barriers.

Phase 1: Engaging

Creating a safe place and a foundation for positive change.

Pattern	Strengths to see	Ways to respond
Domineering	Ambitious, determined, decisive, persuasive	Reflect their wish to help; guide focus to self; invite others' reactions; affirm determination.
Suspicious	Clever, skeptical, watchful, witty	Emphasize choice; reflect self-protection; affirm "keeping it real."
Reserved	Thick-skinned, straightforward, focused	Emphasize practical solutions; invite "hard truths"; affirm independence.
Socially anxious	Private, soft-spoken, thoughtful	Invite them to speak early in rounds; give permission to observe first; affirm strengths.
Non-assertive	Easygoing, cooperative, avoids conflict	Invite reactions and comments on group process; emphasize choice; affirm teamwork.
Easily swayed	Modest, humble, forgiving, gentle	Draw out their view; emphasize choice; affirm their gentleness.
Over-nurturing	Warm, welcoming, caring, helpful	Guide focus back to self; emphasize choice; affirm their care for others.
Over-sharing	Sociable, energetic, expressive	Reflect themes rather than stories; go first in rounds; ask them to summarize others; affirm energy.

- Member roles** Restate "expert" comments the MI way: closed questions as open, interpretations as reflections, challenges as personal choice. Reflect the intent behind a challenge. Roles like "guru" or "class clown" can signal the group doesn't feel safe yet.
- Hurtful comments** Address them and remind everyone of the guidelines, without letting them take over.

The first session

- Build trust and participation. Don't jump into the deep end: welcome, introductions, a little self-disclosure.
- Explain the group briefly (OPEN): Overview of purpose, Personal choice, Environment of respect, Non-confrontational.
- Acknowledge how people came to the group, and clarify your role.
- Draw out group guidelines: confidentiality, respect, turn-taking. If the group can't agree, try some out for this session.
- Draw out personal goals, reframed in the positive.
- Close by addressing any negativity and ending safely.

Phase 2: Exploring perspectives

Building cohesion and focusing on perspectives rather than situations.

Guiding	Member-centered, positive, here-and-now. Acknowledge suffering without fishing for grievances.
Group dynamics	Identities emerge; a positive network forms. Speak to the group as a whole, use “we,” and keep linking members.
What helps	Universality (we share struggles), acceptance, hope from watching others grow, and learning from each other.
Leader tasks	Manage time and focus, revisit norms, keep emotions safe, and help members focus on what they can choose.
Strategies	A typical day, exploring ambivalence (good and not-so-good things), exploring values.
Traps	Too much information, the expert role, rushing activities, over-attachment to the agenda, letting a few voices dominate, and allowing attacks.
Ready to move on	The group starts asking “now what?” When about half the members are open to moving forward, consider phase 3.

Phase 3: Broadening perspectives

Looking to the future, building direction, momentum and investment in change.

Guiding	Positives, DARN CATS, the bigger picture. Explore possible paths. Develop discrepancy gently. Lean into discomfort.
Group dynamics	Deep bonds, “we” over “me,” trust in the process, shared goals, mutual support.
What helps	Vicarious learning (affirming one member affirms all), release of feelings, self-understanding, hope.
Leader tasks	Let the group answer questions, help members talk to each other, reflect meaning and values, be transparent about what you notice.
Strategies	Stages of change and other models, brief feedback with EPE, looking forward, decisional balance, importance and confidence, success stories, naming each other’s strengths.
Tips and traps	Relax and enjoy the group. Step back so members lead. Watch the pace: too slow bores, too fast stirs discord.

Phase 4: Moving into action

Members are open to new ideas and small steps toward change.

Guiding	Small steps. Help members ask for what they need. Plan for the next two weeks and for the group’s ending. Prepare for obstacles.
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What helps	Sharing successes and setbacks, learning by example, generosity toward peers, growing confidence, expanding hope.
Leader tasks	Facilitate more than lead. Normalize ongoing ambivalence. Talk about the ending throughout, framing it as a transition.
Strategies	Review importance and confidence, hypothetical plans when stakes feel high, change plans (spoken or written), commitment without pressure, learning from each other.
Setbacks	Success comes less from a perfect plan than from adapting through challenges.
Ending	A closing activity to share takeaways and next steps. The leader takes a back seat. Members can imagine their lives three months from now.

Source

Wagner, C. C., & Ingersoll, K. S. (2013). Motivational interviewing in groups. Guilford Press.