

**MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING AS A TOOL
TO ADDRESS FARM STRESS, FARM SUCCESSION,
AND OTHER DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

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Abstract

Farmers and their families live and work closely together. The demanding nature of work makes farming a stressful occupation. Cooperative Extension System (CES) educators are creating and expanding stress management and mental health resources to reduce farm stress and improve wellbeing. Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a way of working collaboratively with people to support their motivation for and commitment to change. This paper reviews the development of an MI-based CES professional development program to improve the adoption of a goal-oriented communication technique that will assist educators when engaging with farmers and farm families. MI may prove helpful with increasing the likelihood that educators can assist in changing behaviors that may be impacting stress levels. In this training program, Extension educators with a wide range of subject matter expertise were able to increase their knowledge and comfort level with MI concepts and skills even though lacking prior background or experience with MI techniques. With improved communication skills, CES educators can meet the needs of the farmers and farm families they work with, and inspire behavior changes when engaging in meaningful conversations on critical and time-sensitive topics related to farm stress, farm succession, and other difficult conversations.

Keywords: *communication, educators, Extension, farm, stress, motivational interviewing*

Introduction

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that nine out of 10 of the world's farms are family farms (FAO 2014). In the United States (U.S.) and the state of Wisconsin, family farms comprise 96% of all farms (USDA NASS 2021). Farmers and their families live and work closely together. With the median age of U.S. and Wisconsin farmers increasing, they desire to pass on control of their family business to the next generation (Gasson and Errington 1993). However, the demanding nature of work makes farming a stressful occupation (Fraser et al. 2005). Benefits exist when generations work together on the farm. However, conflict and tension can arise that add to the stress of both generations.

Farmers must cope with many stressors in their profession as well as their personal lives, including financial, time, and workload pressures; the unpredictability of the agricultural industry and weather events; interpersonal conflicts with family and non-family members; social isolation; and farm succession (Fraser et al. 2005, Henning-Smith et al. 2021, Truchot and Andela 2018, Nigatu et al. 2020). These multitude of stressors have been exacerbated over recent years due to significant economic instability that have been out of the farmer's control, including the U.S. farm income crisis that began in 2014 (FAO 2021), weather and natural disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Cole and Bondy 2020).

Created and funded by U.S legislation (USDA NIFA 2022), the U.S. established a Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network (FRSAN) to provide stress assistance programs to farmers. In regional networks, Cooperative Extension System (CES) educators are creating and expanding stress management and mental health resources to reduce stress and improve wellbeing of farmers and their families.

Educators with the Cooperative Extension System serve a critical role in their local communities, though many educators may enter their career without a complete skill set (Myers 2011). Educators are more proficient in their subject matter expertise area, but may be less competent in other skills, like oral and written communication skills (Harder, Place and Scheer, 2010). Educators who work with farmers and their families may work through more tension, conflict, and difficult conversations because of the changes occurring within and outside of the agriculture industry.

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is 'a collaborative conversation style for strengthening a person's own motivation and commitment to change' (Miller and Rollnick 2013). This technique was developed in alcohol abuse consultations and has shown to be effective in stimulating client behavior change, e.g. to reduce alcohol abuse, tobacco use, or to adopt lifestyle changes (Lundahl et al. 2010). More recently, the MI approach has been used in enforcement and regulatory situations for food and health safety, by environmental inspectors (Forsberg et al. 2014, Wickström et al. 2017), and by cattle veterinarians as highly relevant to their profession (Svensson et al. 2019). Bard et al. (2017) research suggested that veterinarians who had used a 'directive style' (e.g. told farmers what they needed to do) were less likely to see positive behavior changes.

This paper explores the development of an MI-based CES professional development program to improve the adoption of a goal-oriented communication technique to assist educators engaging with farmers and farm families on farm stress, farm succession, and other difficult conversations and ensure positive behavior changes to address these issues.

Methods

The professional development program was created by a small group of educators that shared a mutual interest in addressing the farm stress of farmers and farm families. These educators represented program areas of agriculture, families, and health and well-being within the University of Wisconsin – Madison Division of Extension (Extension). This group was experienced in curriculum development and instructional delivery methods to a range of audiences. These educators have worked in group settings as well as one-on-one with farmers and farm families in their local communities.

The group's nine educators pursued MI learning opportunities to increase their knowledge of MI techniques. As MI is a complex skill, multiple approaches were undertaken. The group completed a literature review of journal articles that incorporated MI techniques and their application with farms and families. Additional self-study was completed with review of an MI textbook (Miller and Rollnick 2013) and an MI skill workbook (Rosengren 2017). A two-day training conference provided an occasion for the group to obtain an overview of the application method and practice specific skills. The conference was taught by MINT (Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers), an international organization of trainers in MI. Trainers came from diverse backgrounds and utilize MI in a variety of settings.

Participants

Participants were recruited from all Extension program areas utilizing email and direct communication messages. Two introductory Zoom (web conferencing) workshops were held in January and February 2020, prior to the training series. Nearly fifty educators, an estimated eight percent of Extension educators involved with farmers and farm families, registered to participate in the MI training. Participants were affiliated with Extension program areas of agriculture, community development, families, health, natural resources, and youth. Participation in the training was voluntary. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several of these educators did not complete the full training program.

Training

The MI training was offered as a four-part Zoom workshop series in March and April 2020. Titled 'Motivational Mondays,' workshops were 75 minutes in length and consisted of theoretical introductions of MI, techniques with experiential exercise of different MI skills, group discussion, and case examples. The workshops highlighted the four key concepts or fundamental processes of MI, as listed in table 1. Workshop objectives and MI core skills are also detailed in table 1. The selection of the key concepts for each workshop was inspired by common MI practice (Miller and Rollnick 2013). Participants were asked to complete pre or post workshop assignments, which were reviewed at the beginning of each workshop.

Table 1. Workshop, concept, skill, and objectives at each of the 4 workshops in a training program in motivational interviewing (MI) for Extension educators

Workshop	MI Concept	MI Skill	Objective
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1.	Spirit of Motivational Interviewing	Reflective Statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the fundamental spirit and principles of MI. - Become more comfortable creating reflective statements and responses.
2.	Engaging	Open-ended questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthen empathic skills OARS + I (Open-ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections, Summaries, Information). - Learn how to engage clients in the change process.
3.	Focusing	Elicit – Provide – Elicit for information exchange	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the process of focusing, including: identification of specific goals and identification of intended outcomes. - Increase awareness of how to conduct effective information exchange through the exploration of common traps and principles of good practice.
4.	Evoking	Eliciting change talk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Become aware of fundamental ways to strengthen clients' motivation for change. - Learn of skills to recognize and respond to change talk. - Become more comfortable responding to change talk in a way that strengthens it.

Surveys

Prior to the beginning of the training program, registered participants were emailed a brief survey to complete using Qualtrics (online survey software tool). The first part of the survey asked their knowledge of MI and comfort level in dealing with difficult conversations. The second part of the survey contained open fields where participants were asked to describe what they hoped to gain through this professional development training and concerns that they might have about implementing MI.

During each of the four workshops, participants were asked to complete a brief survey at the beginning and end of the training using polls within the Zoom workshop. The evaluation assessed participant knowledge of the MI concept before and after the training (on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being *not knowledgeable* and 4 being *very knowledgeable*) and level of comfort with using the specific MI skill presented during that workshop (on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 4, with 1 being *very uncomfortable* and 4 being *very comfortable*).

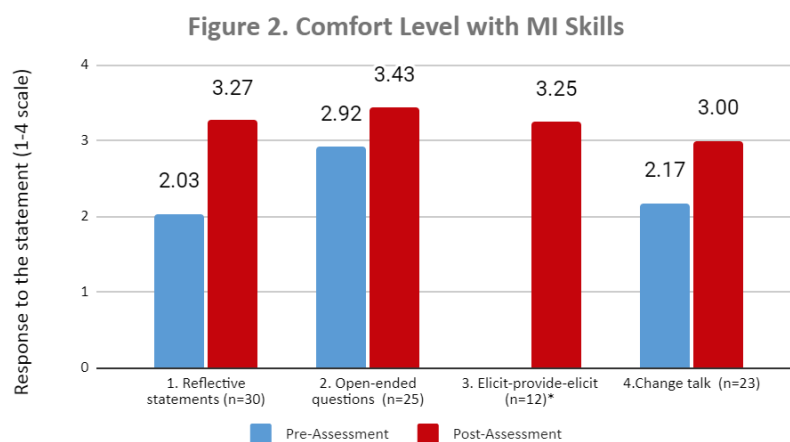
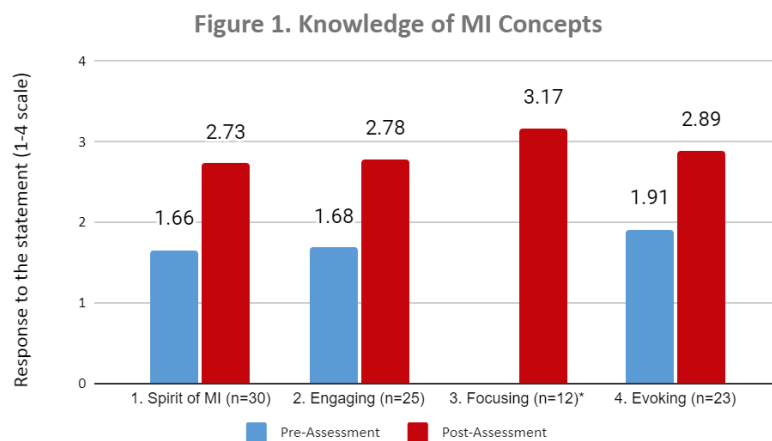
A follow-up survey using Qualtrics was emailed to registered participants approximately eight months after the final workshop. The survey sought to determine (1) participant concept and skill usage, (2) if knowledge of MI had influenced their work or changed their approach to their work, and (3) value of the training program.

All results to the surveys were recorded with the workshop number and date but were otherwise anonymous.

Results

Of the forty-nine registered participants, thirty-eight completed the four-part training program. The number of survey responses for workshops 1 to 4 was 30, 25, 12, and 23.

Initial results suggested that participants gained a considerable amount of knowledge regarding MI concepts by participating in the workshops (Figure 1). After completing the training program, participants reported that they feel more comfortable using the MI skills in their work (Figure 2). Pre and post assessment survey results of the knowledge gained of MI concepts and comfort level with MI skills are shown in figures 1 and 2.



*Note, due to a Zoom poll issue, pre-session data was lost for workshop 3.

Eight months after the initial training program, participants responded to a brief follow up survey. Eleven out of thirteen educators reported that the knowledge gained from the workshops had influenced their work or changed the approach to their work. Participants noted:

- *“Motivational interviewing has given me tools to engage people without defaulting to “here's some advice or a solution to your problem.” From experience this default has turned people off, but I wasn't sure how else to do it. Now I have tools to keep the conversation open and moving to positive change.”*
- *“The use of specific open ended questions enhances communication. It helps level the playing field and takes away the “I know more than you so you need to listen to me” piece. Plus we always CAN learn from the participants. It's a win-win!”*

When asked if they had utilized various MI skills, all respondents reported that they incorporated at least one MI skill when working with farmers and farm families. Respondents provided examples of how MI skills have benefited their work:

- *“These techniques help me to slow down and really listen to people and show I'm listening. I intend to use all the techniques when working with clients to problem solve in the future.”*
- *“Open-ended questions alone can give so much information into a situation. When I'm wanting to understand something, this is my go-to.”*
- *“Helps create a smoother conversation and helps create deeper conversation rather than yes/no responses.”*

Overall, participants found the training program to be valuable, an average of 4.08 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being *not valuable* and 5 being *very valuable*.

- *“I am glad you offered the class. I did gain some new ways of thinking. Thank you for taking on this task.”*
- *“I've always wanted to learn more about the MI process, and this was so in depth and very much appreciated. It helped me build more confidence in my work with colleagues and those in my community.”*

One respondent provided a suggestion for improvement of the training program.

- *“My only feedback is I wish I had more time to fully engage in this work. I felt so pulled to support other activities both within Extension and in my community during these challenging times. Just wish there was more time on my end.”*

Discussion

The purpose of CES educators has always been to serve the needs of the public, mainly by identifying emerging needs, providing research-based information and resources, and encouraging application

of science and technology to improve conditions (USDA NIFA 2022a). The purpose of introducing MI to Extension educators was to provide a framework for working more effectively with farmers and farm families, to increase their motivation to change behaviors that impact their stress levels.

Educators are often sought out to provide information and advice (Moore 1973). The purpose of this program was to encourage educators to spend more time listening and engaging in techniques that would allow an opportunity for the farmer or farm family member to vocalize their farm stressors and identify reasons to change, rather than being told how and why they should change.

To date, limited research has been found on the use of MI concepts and skills in CES programming. Radunovich et. al (2017) research demonstrated program impact through behavior change with a pilot study in family and consumer sciences CES programming. However, MI may prove helpful for use with farm stress, farm succession, and other difficult conversations and increase the likelihood that educators working with farmers and farm families can assist them to change their behaviors that may be increasing their stress levels.

By and large, all participants learned and incorporated at least one of the MI skills instilled during the training program. Participants reported an increased knowledge level of MI concepts, comfort level with the use of MI skills, and intent to use MI in their work. Consequently, it seems achievable that CES educators could use MI within their work.

The improvement of MI skills reached by the participants in this training program was similar to what was reported in other studies on training of professionals that may have had some experience (Svensson et. al 2019; Wickström et. al 2017). These studies suggest it may be difficult to integrate MI skills into the work of already trained professionals. Radunovich et. al (2017) suggest, *“those who are new to the program may be more receptive to using MI, whereas those who have developed their own style of work might be less inclined to change.”* Motivational interviewing training complements some existing communication training. It may be beneficial to introduce MI concepts and skills at an early stage of a CES educator’s career. Learning MI should involve some intentional ‘un-learning’ of skills used with farmers and farm families, including information sharing and advice giving.

Motivational interviewing is not meant to be learned by self-study or simply attending a workshop, which is only a beginning. MI is a set of principles and skills that take time, practice, and discipline to learn. Miller & Rollnick (2013) state, *“Elements of MI can make a difference in practice quite quickly, while gaining competence in the approach requires the clinician to be highly self-reflective on their intention, use of skills and attention to the client.”*

In addition to the four workshops, the Extension educator group had planned to offer a half-day (4-hour) in-person workshop after the completion of the online training program. This in-person session was designed to provide an opportunity for participants to practice and gain real-time feedback on MI skills learned during the training program. Role-play conversations and practical training in small groups was intended for the in-person workshop.

The four-part training program was provided online at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Extension educators reported being overwhelmed with the number of changes that were occurring at that time, including cancellation of Extension programming and a transition to working remotely (outside of their normal office location). While this training program was a novel approach to address farm stress and other emerging and ongoing challenges, this professional development program was voluntary. Other priorities during the pandemic may have taken precedence,

decreasing the number of participants that expressed an interest and that completed the full training program.

Also due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the in-person workshop was cancelled and was not rescheduled. In its place, the Extension educator group created a 'Community of Practice' series of workshops to encourage participants to further develop their MI skills. Workshops were held monthly from June through December 2020 using Zoom. Each workshop was designed for educators to practice implementing one of the MI concepts and skills learned in the training program, and featured an in-depth focus on specific MI components - the OARS+I (Open-ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections, Summaries, Information) - with take-home practice ideas. Additional workshops offered, both online and in-person, would continue to assist participants in developing their MI skills for better positive behavior changes with farmers and farm families.

Conclusions

During 2020, thirty-eight Extension educators were trained in an MI-based professional development program to assist with engaging in farm stress, farm succession, and other difficult conversations with farmers and farm families in their local communities. Extension educators with a wide range of subject matter expertise were able to increase their knowledge and comfort level with MI concepts and skills even though they may have lacked prior background or experience with MI.

Miller and Rollnick (2013) indicate learning MI is an ongoing process, with practice and feedback needed to become more proficient. They also state that MI communication skills are not easy to establish without specific training. Motivational Interviewing is one communication tool of many techniques that can be applied to CES educator's efforts in supporting farmers and farm families dealing with stress. Conflict resolution, coaching, Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), and Question Persuade Refer (QPR) are other tools to be considered for further training and skill development to assist farmers and farm families in dealing with farm stress, farm succession, and other difficult conversations.

Literature suggests it is important for CES educators at all stages of their career to enhance their communication skills, whether it be with MI or other communication tools. Furthermore, results from this training program demonstrate that educators perceive MI to be valuable to their work. With improved communication skills, CES educators can meet the needs of the farmers and farm families they work with, and inspire positive behavior changes when engaging in meaningful conversations on critical and time-sensitive topics related to farm stress, farm succession, and other difficult conversations.

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