

Motivational Interviewing

Interview Transcripts

Reighan

This is an unrehearsed candid conversation (not a clinical session or role-play) with Dr. William R. (Bill) Miller to demonstrate some specific aspects of motivational interviewing as described in the 2023 4th edition of Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change and Grow by Miller and Rollnick. Staff from The Change Companies volunteered to talk about specific topics in their own lives. The topic for this conversation was “A choice or change you have been considering and have not decided. You don’t want advice; you just want a good listener to help you think through the pros and cons,” and Bill’s task was to counsel with neutrality using a decisional balance approach. Bill’s notes in the right-hand column focus specific MI skills, not every MI-consistent response. Reighan spoke about ambivalence regarding continuing her relationship with her biological father.

Interview	Skill
<p>Bill [00:00:11] So we’re going to talk about a dilemma that you’re experiencing.</p> <p>Reighan [00:00:14] Yes. Would you like me to tell you about that?</p> <p>Bill [00:00:16] Please, yes.</p> <p>Reighan [00:00:18] So I’ve been having an ongoing internal battle about whether or not I want to continue a relationship with my biological father. And part of me is like, “This person hasn’t really added too much value in my life.” And it’s been a very complicated relationship. But then the other part of me is like, I know the day that he passes away will come with “Will I have regret or guilt?”</p> <p>Bill [00:00:51] Yes.</p> <p>Reighan [00:00:51] Where my inner child is coming from is, when I was younger, I always thought that everybody had good in them, and I still do. But that thought process has evolved, whereas everybody might have good in them. But it doesn’t mean I’m the one that necessarily is meant to bring that out of that person when a relationship gets so complicated.</p>	

Interview	Skill
<p>Bill [00:01:17] So you at some point have felt almost responsible to bring out the good in him. Now you're not so sure.</p> <p>Reighan [00:01:25] For sure.</p>	<p>Double-sided reflection of ambivalence</p>
<p>Bill [00:01:26] Well, what what's been the upside of your relationship with him so far?</p> <p>Reighan [00:01:33] So the upside is definitely when I was younger, I have so many memories. I definitely get my adventurous side from my dad. We would go fishing, we would listen to Metallica. He taught me how to head-bang as a young child. (Laughs) We would go sledding and we would just have the best times together. I really looked up to him when I was younger, but looking back, I am like, "Wow." As a child, there was a lot of irresponsibility going on that my mom didn't know of because they were separated.</p>	<p>Querying pros (+) of their relationship</p>
<p>Bill [00:02:11] Taking chances.</p> <p>Reighan [00:02:13] Yeah, and just not being responsible with me either. Like, for instance, once my mom found out the things that he was dealing with, he had a big drug problem from the day I was born. Once she found that out is when she got custody. But he would even come pick me up from daycare when he wasn't supposed to take me out of school. And at the time I'm like, "Oh, this is great. We get to go to the arcade!" But then the cops are coming looking for me and bringing me to my house, which was really confusing. So looking back, I thought that was fun. But at the time it's like he was putting himself first in all of these situations and not really thinking about how that might affect me later on.</p>	<p>Reflecting Negative</p>
<p>Bill [00:02:58] So there's some good memories there. Even the memories are like, "Yeah, maybe that wasn't so good," but you had fun together, at least. And what about currently? Is there a benefit or an upside of your relationship with him now as an adult?</p> <p>Reighan [00:03:19] So the last time I spoke to him was when my Grandma Fisher died, who was his mom. And we were still speaking up until that point here and there, which I'll also add — he was very in and out of my life. My whole life. There'd be times where he was supposed to get me from daycare and never picked me up, so I always would bring my wall down, get let down, build a wall up, break it down, build a wall and break it down. But I saw so many dark sides of him come out because when someone passes away, there's money involved. There's all of these things.</p> <p>Bill [00:04:01] Yes.</p>	<p>Reflecting Positive / Querying Positive</p>

Interview	Skill
<p>Reighan [00:04:01] Which, by the way, he was also somebody that never paid child support, never supported my life financially. So he thought I was going to get all this money from my grandma, which I didn't, but he was already asking me for it and just things like that. And it just made me feel like I couldn't trust him and I didn't really know what his intentions were, especially during such a hard time in our lives. So up until now, I haven't really seen the value. And then we had a falling out because he ended up getting money from my grandma. But then child support garnished it because he never had bank accounts or anything, so he didn't have to pay child support. So he blamed me for taking all of his money, which was not all of it, and said really hurtful things to me and blamed me for so many things. And so I'm like, "Wow. I've always rooted for you my whole life. But I've seen your true colors here, and I don't really see the point."</p> <p>Bill [00:05:06] You rooted for him. Tell me about that.</p> <p>Reighan [00:05:11] I would always...</p>	
<p>Bill [00:05:18] Something particularly painful about rooting for him.</p> <p>Reighan [00:05:24] Yeah, I would always stand up for him. And like I said, the inner child is like, this person can change. He's a good person, you know? But the things that he said to me and about my mom, I was like, I don't even think this person's fully here in his head. I think there's something wrong with him.</p> <p>Bill [00:05:53] Yeah.</p> <p>Reighan [00:05:53] And even when I have conversations with him, it's so one-sided. It's never asking about my life. It's always going on rants about him. I don't even know what he's talking about sometimes. So that's what I mean. I don't know if I'm the person that has the energy or the time — maybe he needs help in other places.</p>	<p>Reflecting Her Sadness</p>
<p>Bill [00:06:18] Well, there's not much positive experience with him now with you as an adult.</p> <p>Reighan [00:06:24] Yeah.</p>	<p>Reflecting Negative</p>
<p>Bill [00:06:25] It was kind of fun as a kid, but now it's not very enjoyable to be with him, huh?</p> <p>Reighan [00:06:33] Yeah. Or even really talk to him.</p> <p>Bill [00:06:36] Yeah.</p>	

Interview	Skill
<p>Reighan [00:06:37] And I feel like my life — once I kind of cut that relationship off with my dad, I started giving people that are similar to him less of the time of day of my life. And I think I never gave myself permission to do that, because I kind of want to be an example for people in life. Oh, yeah. But what I'm realizing is, it's okay. My life is improved — I feel like a lot — by letting go of some friends that have just not been the best and letting go of that relationship with my dad. And I've even had a really terrible stepdad in the past that I don't talk to, and I feel like my life has improved so much. But there's always that in the back of your head, because he still calls me and texts me and I can't — I just feel like I don't have the heart to block him in case he does die or something.</p>	
<p>Bill [00:07:48] But that's what you're considering — of just closing that door. Reighan [00:07:53] Mmhmm.</p>	<p>Reflecting Discontinuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:07:53] Yeah. Well, one thing that's already been a benefit of doing that is you don't feel the need to be there for everybody who's like that as well. So you've, in a way, already let go of some of that. Reighan [00:08:12] Yeah.</p>	<p>Reflecting Positive of Discontinuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:08:14] What would be good about actually closing the door and blocking his number and saying, "I don't want to talk to you." Reighan [00:08:33] I think it's kind of like... We all can kind of latch onto an idea of, okay, if I were to talk to him and imagine or daydream about it, I paint the best scenario, knowing it's going to take time. I have a wall up. We would do baby steps. But every time I have let him in, it's not like that at all.</p>	<p>Querying Positive of Discontinuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:08:59] Yeah. The imagining is better than the reality. Reighan [00:09:02] Exactly. And I feel like this at this time, my wiser self is like, "Would it be easier to just continue to not?" But is that something I need to tell him? It's like he lives in a land where he'll text me. He'll text me what he had for dinner tonight or text me things that he's working on as if we have a relationship. And I don't know if I were to end this relationship, if I just need to tell him, "Hey, I don't know if I want you in my life." Bill [00:09:43] So, you're not sure how you would do it. Reighan [00:09:45] Yeah.</p>	<p>Reflecting Negative of Discontinuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:09:46] Even though it seems like a good idea in some ways. Reighan [00:09:49] Right. And my other option would be to really set boundaries and say, "Hey, Dad. To be honest with you, our relationship has been really overwhelming in my life."</p>	<p>Reflecting Positive of Discontinuation</p>

Interview	Skill
<p>Bill [00:10:02] Overwhelming.</p> <p>Reighan [00:10:03] “So I’m willing to maybe talk to you once a month to check in to start, but I really don’t want that boundary crossed. I don’t want you calling me all the time or thinking we have a relationship that we don’t.”</p> <p>Bill [00:10:22] You mentioned your wiser yourself. What does your wiser self say about this?</p> <p>Reighan [00:10:29] Maybe it’s worth one more shot? I don’t know how to go about it. And I’m not a child anymore, so now that I’m older and I know how to speak up for myself, I could really set ground rules and see if it works. And if not, even set up by saying, “Hey, this is my last chance with you. We haven’t spoken in four years. I’m willing to dip my toe in. But these are my ground rules.” And also not to get too emotionally involved in our relationship, to not get let down. Don’t allow myself to get let down.</p>	<p>Reflecting Negative of Relationship</p>
<p>Bill [00:11:17] The wiser self is saying, “He’s disappointed me so many times. Don’t expect something better at this point. When I imagine it, it doesn’t happen.”</p> <p>Reighan [00:11:32] Yeah.</p> <p>Bill [00:11:35] You haven’t talked for four years? So you’ve had a long space of no contact.</p> <p>Reighan [00:11:41] Yeah. Initially, after he said things about me and my mom, I wrote him a letter saying, “If you want to have a relationship with me, this is what I expect from you.” And kind of just laying out that he has no right to speak to me like this because he hasn’t even been in my life. And at first, when I sent him the letter, he had a huge emotional response saying it was the biggest joke he’s ever seen in his life and just going on and on. Four years later, just recently... Because I also said, “You need to apologize for what you’ve done.” And I rarely ask people for an apology, but this is a very complex relationship where like I said, I’ve been his biggest supporter in life, like always rooting him on. And then for his one supporter to just treat me the way he did, I’m like (shakes head). So just recently, four years later, he finally texted me and apologized sincerely. So I’m like, okay. And I also said in the letter, “I think you need to get help,” like talk to somebody. I don’t know if he’s using or not. It seems like...</p> <p>Bill [00:13:05] Can’t tell.</p> <p>Reighan [00:13:05] Yeah, I can’t tell. So that’s another thing. But apparently he said he’s getting help. I don’t know the truth to that. I’m not going to latch on to that. But the apology was a big thing for me. And also, he still had a balance of child support, which I said “To me, it’s not about the money, but if you are able to pay this off, it will prove to me that you actually are invested in my life.” So he’s checked two of those things off that list. It’s taken four years, but it seems like he is taking a little bit of accountability.</p>	<p>Reflecting Negative of Continuation</p>

Interview	Skill
<p>Bill [00:13:47] So in a way, this is, “Should I reopen a door here that’s been fairly closed?”</p> <p>Reighan [00:13:53] Yeah.</p>	<p>Reflecting Ambivalence</p>
<p>Bill [00:13:56] That’s the dilemma. And one thing you’re considering is kind of something in between, maybe once a month. We’ll be in touch, and I’ll set some limits around that. And see how that goes.</p> <p>Reighan [00:14:11] Yeah.</p>	<p>Reflecting Tentative Continuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:14:12] You sound willing to do that or willing to try it.</p> <p>Reighan [00:14:16] Yeah, I think so. And just knowing that I don’t necessarily trust this person is a big one. There’s still a lot I’d like to learn from him, too. Like he’s a builder. He’s great with making homes, and there’s all this knowledge that I want to learn from him that could be a good bonding experience for us. And I just bought a house and I need to know these things. So that could be the bridge that reconnects, you know?</p>	<p>Reflecting Continuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:14:52] Could be.</p> <p>Reighan [00:14:53] But like you said, we’re not gonna have too big of a hope there.</p>	<p>Reflecting Potential Positive of Continuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:15:01] So there’s a lot of pain in this relationship. I mean, you’ve been hurt a lot by him. He seems to be making some efforts now to say this relationship means something to him, at least. And your dilemma is, “Do I want to open that window or that door at all?” And it sounds like you’re looking at cautiously opening it a bit with some protections around that.</p> <p>Reighan [00:15:34] Yeah.</p>	<p>Reflecting Negative of Relationship, Potential Positive, and Ambivalence / Reflecting Continuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:15:37] Besides the positive memories from your childhood of having fun with him, there’s some things you could learn from him that you would appreciate. And so that’s a nice possibility there on the horizon. And at the same time, very understandable caution of, “I don’t know if I should trust him at all.”</p> <p>Reighan [00:16:10] Yeah.</p>	<p>Reflecting Positive of Relationship and of Continuation and Potential Negative</p>
<p>Bill [00:16:11] And what you’re thinking about is just to open things a little bit, with some walls around it, and see what happens with that.</p> <p>Reighan [00:16:23] Yeah, definitely a lot to think about.</p>	<p>Reflecting Tentative Continuation Option</p>

Interview	Skill
<p>Bill [00:16:26] Oh, yeah. What feels good about doing that?</p> <p>Reighan [00:16:33] I think knowing that I can give it one more shot, the possibility of that on my own terms feels safe. And it does seem like a win-win situation. It could be a chance to rekindle a very complex relationship without it getting too serious. And also to know that if anything were to happen to him, I wouldn't have the "What if?"</p>	<p>Querying Positive of Continuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:17:13] You would have made an effort, yeah. And what feels less good about opening that window?</p> <p>Reighan [00:17:21] Him not respecting my boundaries. Him thinking that things are just going back, with me knowing, "Okay, it's been four years, let's see if you've changed" or I've put a lot of thought into this to get let down and to just be disappointed.</p>	<p>Reflecting Positive / Querying Negative of Continuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:17:44] Again.</p> <p>Reighan [00:17:45] Yeah.</p> <p>Bill [00:17:46] Yeah.</p> <p>Reighan [00:17:47] Which is a theme, too...</p> <p>Bill [00:17:50] A long theme.</p> <p>Reighan [00:17:51] Yeah. Because not only does that reflect — it affects me mentally. And it's not just a reoccurring thing with my dad, but it carries on into, "Can I give other people a chance that are like this?" So it would not just affect my relationship with my dad, but also my optimism for humanity. As weird as that sounds, it's all interconnected.</p>	<p>Reflection Continuing the Paragraph</p>
<p>Bill [00:18:19] So if you open that window or door and it didn't go well, that could set you back in terms of optimism about other relationships with difficult people.</p> <p>Reighan [00:18:31] Yeah. Or even having an intuition about somebody before I've even gotten to know them, noticing red flags and behaviors that I've seen in my dad and judging people before I've gotten to know them. Not even giving them a chance in my life. But we'll see.</p>	<p>Reflecting Negative of Continuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:18:55] That's a pretty clear picture of where you are with this. What would be advantages of, "All right, let's give it a try. Maybe once a month." With that being in your head, a kind of "one more try." And to know, to be at peace in yourself that you gave it the best try you could — and some hope that maybe it could be different this time. And at the same time, long history of disappointment and worry that the same thing will happen again. And so it's a question of, "Do I want to make that choice, am I willing to do that? Is it worth the effort this time?"</p> <p>Reighan [00:19:51] Yeah. A lot to think through.</p>	<p>Reflecting Ambivalence / Querying Positive of Continuation / Reflecting Positive of Continuation / Reflecting Negative of Continuation</p>

Interview	Skill
<p>Bill [00:19:55] And emotionally, so heavy.</p> <p>Reighan [00:19:58] Yeah.</p> <p>Bill [00:19:59] And such a long history.</p> <p>Reighan [00:20:02] Yeah. Emotionally for both sides.</p> <p>Bill [00:20:06] Indeed.</p> <p>Reighan [00:20:07] To not talk or to talk to him.</p>	<p>Reflection Continuing the Paragraph</p>
<p>Bill [00:20:09] Indeed. And he’s making some effort, which gives you some hope that maybe there’s a difference there. But wondering, “Is he using?” and what will happen. And you don’t know what will happen.</p> <p>Reighan [00:20:25] Yeah.</p> <p>Bill [00:20:25] Well thank you.</p> <p>Reighan [00:20:28] Thank you very much. I feel a little bit more clear on it.</p>	<p>Reflecting Potential Positive and Negative of Continuation</p>
<p>Bill [00:20:33] And a tough one. It’s been brave of you to be looking at this and thinking about it. It also feels open-hearted to me, like “Maybe I’ll give it one more try and see.” Even given all the history.</p> <p>Reighan [00:20:52] Yeah.</p>	<p>Affirmation</p>

A challenge in counseling with neutrality is to keep your balance, consciously giving equal attention to both or all sides of the dilemma. A natural risk for an empathic listener is to open up one side and then keep exploring and reflecting it, potentially tipping the balance. Decisional balance offers a mental model for maintaining neutrality. In Reighan’s situation it might look like this:

	Continue the Relationship	Discontinue the Relationship
Advantages	<p>Possibly bring out positives in him Possible positive experiences and help Knowing she gave him another chance</p>	<p>Past negatives of the relationship Avoid new pain, disappointment Relief of overwhelm</p>
Disadvantages	<p>Possible continued pain and regret Mistrust and potential disappointment Potential setback to her optimism</p>	<p>Regret or guilt on his death Potential loss of new positives Regret not giving another chance</p>

It was not my place to encourage her to open or close the door, but rather to consider the whole picture in making a decision. As happens with ambivalence, she went back and forth among positive and negative potentials. I tried to equally query and reflect considerations in each box of the decisional balance. Counseling with neutrality doesn’t necessarily result in a decision being made. The counterbalancing factors here were substantial. The hope is that when a decision is made, they can be at peace with it knowing that they considered all they knew at the time.