

6

Change Talk

Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world.

—HARRIET TUBMAN



By managing counter-change talk and discord, you pave the way for the young person to take the first steps toward change. We now discuss how to reinforce your client's motivational statements called *change talk* (intentions to change, disadvantages of the status quo, advantages of change, and optimism about change). The first step is to recognize change talk, and then you reinforce it with reflections. You can also ask for elaboration with open questions. We will also address strategic open questions to elicit change talk if it does not occur naturally in the conversation when you are supporting autonomy and addressing ambivalence. Note that Miller and Rollnick (2013) describe several person-centered guiding skills (known by the mnemonic OARS: open questions, affirmations, reflections, and summaries). In our years of training different types of practitioners, we have found that simplifying to two of those skills—reflections and open questions—for eliciting

and reinforcing change talk improves the likelihood of trainees' uptake of these skills. Thus, in this edition we describe affirmations and summaries as affirming and summarizing reflections. Not only does this simplify the number of skills needed in the trainee's mind, but also it ensures that the affirming and summarizing statements stay close to the young person's language instead of straying too far into the practitioner's interpretation.

Recognizing Change Talk

In the first few miles of the journey of change, you will hear change talk without strong commitment. These are expressions of the young person's desires, abilities, reasons, and needs (DARN; see Table 6.1) to alter the unhealthy behavior or adopt a healthy behavior. Statements of desire begin with words such as *I want*, *I wish*, *I am motivated*, and *I would like to*. Statements about ability to change convey confidence but do not have to include a declaration of readiness, such as "I think I could do that, but I am not sure I am ready to." Typical stems include *I could*, *I am able to*, and *It's possible*. Desire and ability statements may also take the form of things the young person has tried to do: "I tried to talk to my boyfriend about condoms."

TABLE 6.1. Examples of Change Talk

Preparatory change talk: DARN	Sounds like . . .
D: Desire—want, wish, like	"I want to stop smoking; you don't know how hard it is." "I wish I could lose some weight to be thin like everyone else." "I would like to follow my parents' rules so they wouldn't nag so much."
A: Ability—can, could, able	"I can take my medicine on my own without my parents reminding me all of the time." "I could cut back on the weed if I wanted to." "I might be able to cut back on sweets on weekends."
R: Reason—specific reason for change	"I really don't want to end up on dialysis." "If I get another dirty UA, they'll kick me out of this place."
N: Need—have to, must, important (without stating specific reason)	"I need to lose some serious weight." "I've got to get my blood sugar totally down from where it is."

Regardless of the success of the attempt, the act of trying indicates motivation and is considered change talk.

Statements of need add a sense of urgency to the situation and consist of words such as *I need*, *I must*, *I have to*, *I have got to*, and *I cannot keep doing this*. Statements about reasons for change can include desire and need but add specificity to the content. Thus, reason statements can indicate that the young person may be less ambivalent and further along in the journey of change. For example, a statement such as “I have to do this” conveys a need to change. In contrast, a reason statement would convey a need paired with a specific rationale for the change. For example, “I need to do this for *my health*.” Later in treatment you will hear stronger change talk indicative of commitment, *I will* or *I tried*, as discussed in the planning process in Chapter 7.

➔ **TIP: DON'T WORRY IF REASONS FOR CHANGE ARE UNREALISTIC**

Remember, the young person's reasons for change may not be consistent with yours or those of other adults. The reasons may also not be realistic (such as “I need to quit smoking so I can play professional basketball”), and you may even be tempted to laugh at the rationales some young people offer (e.g., “I need to cut back on drinking so I can save my money for this new video game”). Be sure to maintain a nonjudgmental stance; the end result is increased motivation for change.

Reinforcing Change Talk

Once you have learned to recognize change talk, how do you respond to it? Person-centered guiding skills are used to selectively respond and reinforce change talk and to elicit more change talk with open questions. Note that while we focus on change talk here, the same skills are used to reinforce commitment language as discussed in Chapter 7 (*I will*, *I tried*). The primary guiding skill to reinforce change talk is the use of reflections. Reflective statements have many purposes. In Chapter 5, we note how accurate empathy in response to counter-change talk and discord can be types of reflections (e.g., reflections of feelings) and we touch on affirming reflections as part of stop, drop, and roll. We now review the two broad categories of reflections for reinforcing change talk (that are inclusive of these other types): simple reflections and complex reflections. Within these categories, there are several different types of reflections to reinforce change talk. You might consider these reflections as a menu of options from which to choose what feels most right to you in the moment. Sometimes you might want to do what feels comfortable, and sometimes you might want to try something

new. The goal is to reinforce change talk and to “pluck the change talk out of the jaws of ambivalence” by highlighting change talk and de-emphasizing counter-change talk (assuming you have addressed more pervasive counter-change talk and discord with stop, drop, and roll as described in Chapter 5).

Using reflections for the first time brings both challenges and rewards. As you begin to incorporate reflections into your repertoire, it can be common to wonder if they are sounding a bit contrived to the young person. You may even feel a little clumsy as you begin to practice this new skill, similar to when you first learned to drive a car. When there is so much else to attend to, it can take a while to get comfortable and see the road ahead. When you offer a simple reflection to the young person, it is akin to handing over the steering wheel to the other person. While giving the keys of your car to a first-time driver can be disconcerting, with practice you will get more comfortable allowing the young person to lead the conversation with you as a guide.

**🔄 TIP FOR REINFORCING CHANGE TALK: DON'T FORGET
AUTONOMY SUPPORT**

Though this chapter focuses on guiding skills of reflections and open questions, don't forget that statements to emphasize autonomy can also elicit reflections. Our communication science work using sequential analysis suggested that open questions to elicit change talk, reflections of change talk, *and* statements to emphasize autonomy were significantly more likely to lead to more adolescent change talk than were other kinds of statements (Idalski Carcone et al., 2013). Figure 6.1 demonstrates this pathway.

Simple Reflections

When you repeat or paraphrase the young person's change language, you highlight change talk with a simple reflection (see Figure 6.2). The reflection is “simple” because you do not add any specific meaning or emphasis on the content of what has been said. For example, when a young person says, “I don't want to come here, but I really don't like the constant fighting with my mom,” a paraphrase might sound like “You really don't like the conflict at home.” If you are using a repeating reflection, you may want to repeat only part of the verbiage to avoid engendering a frustrated or sarcastic response, such as “That's what I just said.” Consider “You really don't like it” instead of a full repetition. You can also alternate your use of simple reflections with other types of more complex reflections described below to avoid sounding like a parrot. The idea is that by reinforcing change talk with a reflection, you can elicit more change talk without the use of open questions.

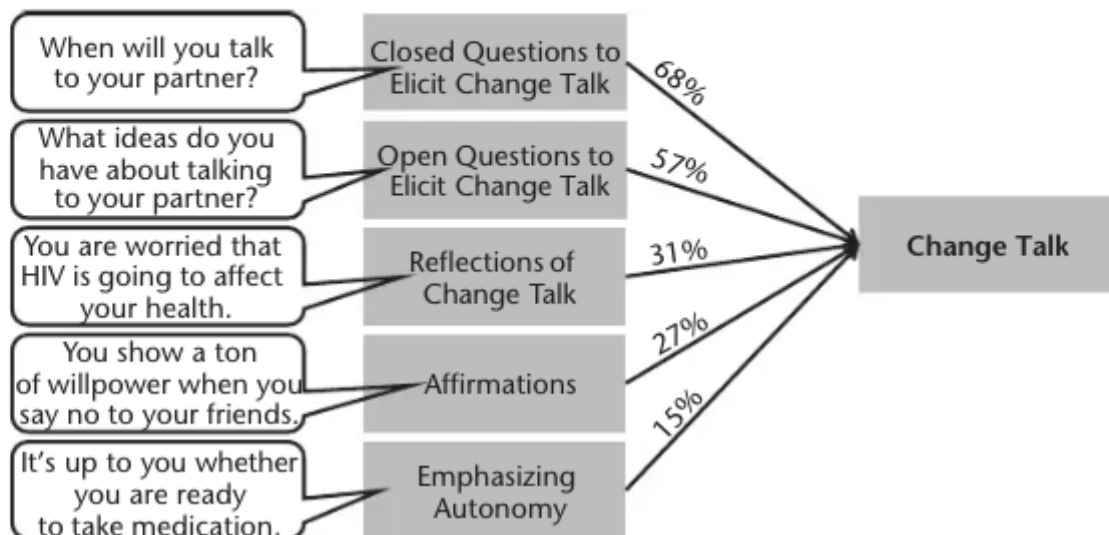


FIGURE 6.1. Sequential predictors of change talk.

➤ **TIP FOR SIMPLE REFLECTIONS: AVOID TURNING REFLECTIONS INTO QUESTIONS**

Inflection—how you use your tone of voice at the end of a statement (turning it up into a question versus stating it in a neutral tone that smacks of a flat-sounding statement)—can make or break the impact of your reflection. Your goal should be to maintain a neutral tone in your use of reflections, as they can easily be turned into questions without careful monitoring. Turning reflections into closed-ended questions can suggest you are not listening and may be interpreted by the young person as judging their behavior. For example, if a person describes his drinking frequency, you might reflect, “You drank a case of beer,” and lower the inflection to sound straightforward. If you say, “You drank a case of beer?” the young person may feel judged because you sound surprised and even disappointed. Try this out loud and see how it sounds. As another example, in the case of a

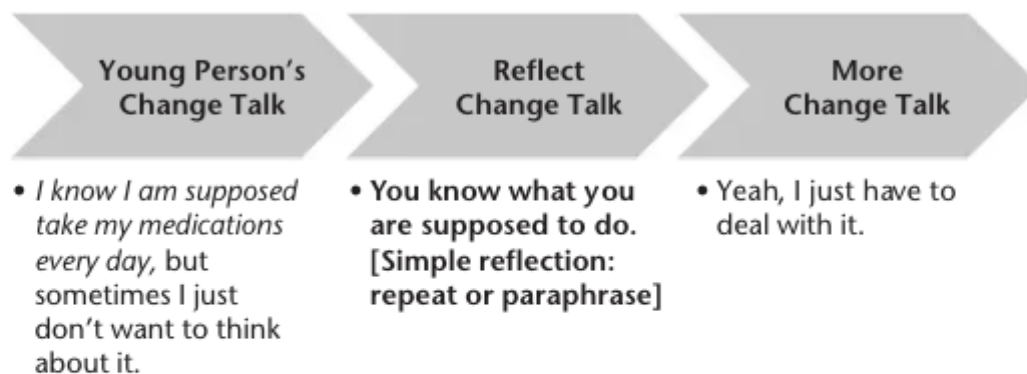


FIGURE 6.2. Example of a simple reflection.

teenage girl who expresses sadness about her boyfriend's behavior, a neutral reflection, such as "You felt sad when your boyfriend did not show up" would be better received than if you said, "You felt sad?" By turning the reflection into a question you convey a sense of not really listening and, in the worst case, could give the impression that her feelings were invalid or unreasonable for the situation.

Complex Reflections

Miller and Rollnick (2013) specify several types of complex reflections. We describe the types that are most appropriate with youth, and we also add affirming reflections and summarizing reflections (for parsimony). Do not worry about memorizing the names of each type of reflection. Instead, be aware that you can choose from a menu of options. Your choice of reflections will be guided by your comfort as well as the young person's communications with you.

🔄 TIP FOR COMPLEX REFLECTIONS: DROP THE STEMS

It is common to begin reflections with stems such as "It sounds like . . ." or "So . . ." or "What you're saying is . . ." However, in most situations, it is generally preferable to drop the stem. The additional words are not necessary and take away more than they add to the content of the message. Moreover, we find that practitioners tend to overuse these stems in clinical encounters. Many adolescents will immediately shy away from statements such as "It sounds like you're feeling . . ." particularly when they have been seen by other practitioners who use this crutch. The stems make the discussion seem more like therapy than like a conversation. If you fall into the trap of overusing the same stem, it may foster nothing in the young person but utter annoyance with you.

🔄 TIP FOR COMPLEX REFLECTIONS: DON'T HESITATE TO USE THE WORD *YOU* WHEN REFLECTING CHANGE TALK

When describing opening strategies in Chapter 4, we emphasized caution in the overuse of statements beginning with *you* as they may increase the young person's reactance early in the change process. However, when reflecting change talk, as when emphasizing autonomy, the incorporation of *you* statements, as in the examples above, clearly emphasize personal choice in the change process. By maintaining this continued collaboration throughout your work with the young person (and not only during the initial rapport building phase), you can enhance the client's sense of self-efficacy and continue to set the stage for behavior change.

Types of Complex Reflections

We present a menu of complex reflections you can use to reinforce change talk. A reflection of the person's *true meaning* expresses the implication of the person's statement (Figure 6.3). It sometimes feels as if you are continuing the paragraph your client has started. For example, if a young person is talking about the multiple appointments he has to attend because of his probation, you might respond with a statement such as "You are tired of people telling you what to do."

A *double-sided reflection* emphasizes ambivalence when you reflect both sides of the young person's mixed feelings about change. It serves to point out the discrepancy between the adolescent's values or goals for change and how her behavior(s) may detract from helping her to attain these outcomes. When engaging in these reflections, Miller and Rollnick (2002) suggest using the conjunction *and* instead of *but* to further normalize having two simultaneously occurring feelings about the target behavior, as this ambivalence is commonly found in most persons seeking to make a change. For example, in the case of an adolescent who smokes cigarettes but is considering quitting, a double-sided reflection might sound like "On the one hand you really like smoking, and on the other hand it is costing you a lot of money." With these types of reflections, it is also especially strategic to end with the positive side of change, as in Figure 6.4, as the person may be more likely to respond to the latter portion of your response.

After you have established rapport, you can begin to use reflection of *client feeling*—reflecting emotions the person either described or implied (Figure 6.5). For example, in the case of Jenny seeking to lose weight and expressing concerns about avoiding classes due to her weight, you might respond, "You're disappointed when you miss out on things like participating in sports or gym class because of your weight." As long as you are actually responding to what the young person has expressed or implied (and not

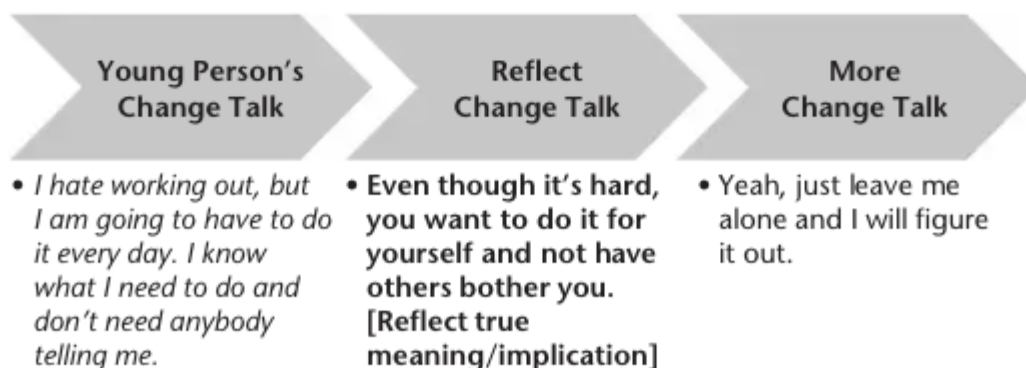


FIGURE 6.3. Example of a reflection of true meaning/implication.

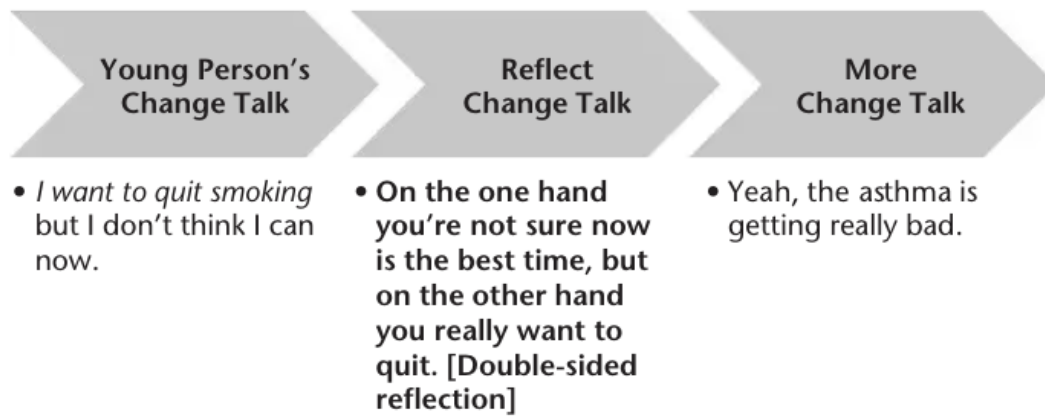


FIGURE 6.4. Example of a double-sided reflection.

straying too far from it), he or she still has the choice to either accept the reflection or clarify whether what you said was accurate.

When you reflect emotions, it is especially important to consider the timing of the reflection. For example, if rapport has not yet been established, a lower-intensity word (a little *sad*) may be better than a high-intensity word (really *depressed*). However, as adolescents are a heterogeneous group, you may also want to emphasize the most prevalent emotions discussed during the encounter, such as feeling anger about having to change. Take, for example, a young person who is bursting with emotions of anger and how he might feel misunderstood if you say, “You were a little angry,” if, in fact, he was “steaming mad.”

Affirming reflections (Figure 6.6) often flow naturally from change talk statements and as always should be closely tied to the content of the change talk. The key to affirmations is your use of honesty and specificity. For example, instead of “You’re smart,” try “It’s smart that you are thinking of your options.” It is also possible that an affirmation may engender counter-change talk when a more challenging young person feels you are overly enthusiastic about change. For example, when you say, “I am

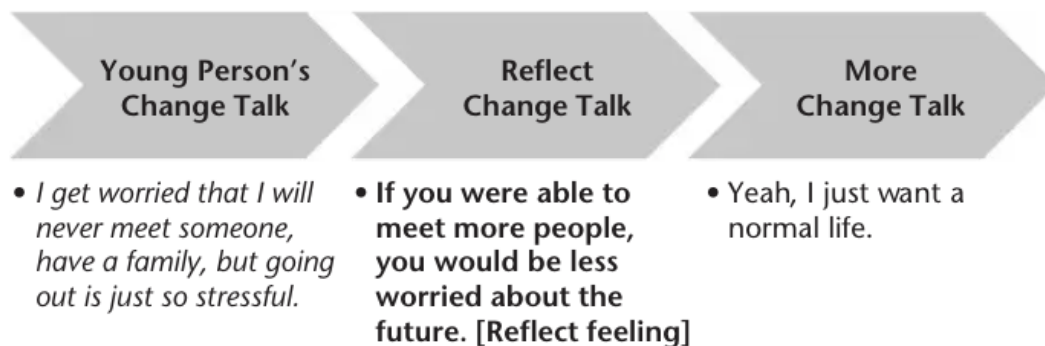


FIGURE 6.5. Example of a feelings reflection.



FIGURE 6.6. Example of an affirming reflection.

really happy you decided to cut back on your drinking,” the young person may rebelliously stop the change process. To avoid this pitfall, affirmations alternatively can be framed without the use of *I* statements, such as “It’s great that you decided to cut back on your drinking.” Affirmations may be incorporated even when you are not directly affirming behavior change. In the earlier case of Jenny, the practitioner affirms her reasons for change even though she is not describing actual behavior change in terms of weight loss. Here is another example of the practitioner using caution when affirming a young person who is early in the change process. The young person says, “I keep having these horrible hangovers when I drink. That might be a reason to slow down.” Instead of prematurely affirming behavior change, “It is wonderful that you are considering cutting back on your drinking,” the practitioner affirms the patient’s strengths: “You seem to be aware of your body’s reaction to alcohol. You really know yourself.”

🔄 TIP FOR AFFIRMATIONS: CONSIDER THE TIMING

Careful consideration of the timing of your affirmation can guide the type of affirmation you choose. Affirmations about a specific behavior may be more acceptable when the person is more ready to change (“It’s great that you want to cut back on your drinking”), whereas affirming strengths and values may be more beneficial when the person is less ready to change (“You are willing to consider difficult decisions in order to make the best choice for yourself”). Obviously, there is no single correct way of affirming a person. Rather, the key to affirmations, as in all reflections, is to not stray too far from the young person’s statement.

Summarizing reflections may be used for the purpose of stringing together several change talk statements, addressing existing ambivalence, and guiding toward change by ending the summary in that direction. Miller and Rollnick (2002) describe this process as picking flowers and presenting them back to the person in a bouquet. Summaries may be especially

relevant for young people, for they may be more prone to impulsively stating contradictory change and counter-change talk statements in the same conversation, particularly in the face of ongoing ambivalence. For example, Travis, who has been drinking and smoking cannabis daily, may offer change talk at the beginning of the encounter, “I’m going to quit!” but minutes later respond with counter-change talk: “What was I thinking? There is no way I can do this.” While change talk may seem fleeting and consistency at times a rarity, a summary can help “connect” the dots in a positive way. You can go beyond merely stringing together change talk statements and begin to tip the balance of pros and cons of behavior change. For example, “You mentioned a few concerns about drinking and drugs. Though you are not sure you want to put any more chemicals inside your body, you mentioned your mood is better when you don’t drink and take Adderall at the same time, and you are a little worried about the changes in your blood pressure. While you are not sure you really want to quit, you are wondering if you want to keep using for the rest of your life.” Summaries also help a young person with limited abstract thinking abilities to pull together different pieces of the puzzle (“Let’s stop for a minute and go over what we’ve discussed so far . . .”), help you to remember all these pieces (“So to make sure that I’m understanding everything correctly . . .”), and let you transition to different tasks of treatment or other components of the agenda (“We’ve covered a lot of topics; getting back to your goals for treatment . . .”).

➤ TIP FOR ANOTHER TYPE OF COMPLEX REFLECTION: USE ACTION REFLECTIONS TO ADDRESS AMBIVALENCE IN CHANGE TALK

In the early stages of change, ambivalence is not resolved. Jenny, the teen struggling with obesity, might say, “I would be able to lose weight if my mom stopped nagging me.” Or “I tried to talk to her about helping me lose weight, but she just does not get it.” The ambivalent young person will often follow change talk with an undermining statement, but this should not lead you away from reinforcing the change talk in the statement. You can address the barriers after you reinforce the change talk. In an *action reflection* (Resnicow & McMaster, 2012), you reflect what the person says in a way that suggests a potential future action toward behavior change. For example, “You think you can follow your meal plan if we can find a way to have your mother stick to checking in only once a day.” An affirming response with an action reflection is “It’s great that you have tried to talk to your mother to reduce the fights. If we can come up with a way for her to really understand you, it might work.” The practitioner reflects the change talk and the ambivalence, and ends the statement with a possible action to be discussed later during the goal setting process.

Eliciting Change Talk

You will use different types of open questions to elicit change talk. In MI, you minimize closed-ended questions because they do not facilitate conversation. Rather, closed-ended questions usually elicit single-word responses. For example, “Do you think that cutting back on smoking would improve your asthma?” can elicit a single word that can count as change talk, “Yeah,” versus an open question such as “What are some reasons quitting smoking would help you?” Too many questions, however, can make the young person feel interrogated and can give the impression you are not listening to the answers. Moyers, Martin, Manuel, Hendrikson, and Miller (2005) suggest that a ratio of two reflections to every question is optimal to promote behavior change. One way to ensure this balance in your encounters is to use a reflective statement before and after every question.

TIP FOR QUESTIONS: CONSIDER MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

There are also times when a young person may be stymied in the face of a very open-ended question such as “What do you think about what the doctor said?” Moreover, we have found that more ambivalent adolescents do not like to answer these types of questions. An alternative to open-ended questions in these situations is to provide a multiple-choice question, such as “Do you agree, disagree, or something else?” In this way, you provide structure for the conversation while still offering choice.

Open-Ended Question to Elaborate Change Talk

When a young person makes a change talk statement, you can ask for elaboration with questions such as “Tell me more about that.” Another more specific request for elaboration used with a young person with alcohol issues might sound like “You say now might be a time to consider cutting back on alcohol. How would you go about it if you were ready?” Note that the content of these questions closely parallels the subject matter of the young person’s statements, without moving ahead too quickly to change topics or begin behavioral change planning.

TIP FOR ASKING FOR ELABORATION: AVOID ASKING FOR ELABORATION ABOUT STEPS AND PLANS AT EARLIER STAGES OF CHANGE TALK

In this early phase of the journey, where change talk does not include a commitment (see Chapter 7), be cautious in using direct questions about next steps and plans. For instance, in the previous example, the practitioner

adds the caveat “if you were ready,” in order to reduce the young person’s perception of being pushed into discussing actions or taking steps for which he or she is not truly ready. In addition, prefacing the question with a reflection is another way you can mirror the young person’s statements, to help guide alongside instead of stepping ahead. “You are considering cutting back on smoking, but you are not sure now is the right time. How might you go about doing it when you are ready?”

🕒 TIP FOR ASKING FOR ELABORATION: TRY A PAUSE BEFORE JUMPING TO A QUESTION

If your reflection is met with silence, try to resist filling the silence immediately. Allow the young person the time to absorb the idea that you are offering him or her an invitation to continue to talk. Given that adolescents often perceive themselves as not being listened to, when you choose to offer the gift of a reflection, we find that your present will most always be received with open arms.

Questions to Elicit New Change Talk

You will often hear spontaneous change talk when actively listening to the young person’s point of view. However, at times you may not hear change talk at all. We find this is particularly common among young people who are very ambivalent. You may be able to reduce counter-change talk and discord with the strategies in Chapter 5 but at the same time may find that the conversation does not automatically tilt to change talk. Below, we list adaptations of open-ended questions to elicit change talk and to guide the young person to maximize his or her potential. As always, you will want to reinforce any resulting change talk with reflections, and listen carefully for any reemergence of resistance signaling that you have moved too quickly.

Direct Questions

Perhaps the most direct way to elicit change talk is to ask for it (see Table 6.2). For example, “If you decided to make a change, how would you do it?” or “What difficulties have you experienced with your diabetes?” Emphasizing your interest in the young person’s perceptions and not rehashing other’s opinions about “what” and “how” they should change can facilitate this process (e.g., “What do you think needs to change in your life?” or “I am interested in what *you* think. What concerns you about your drug use?”).

TABLE 6.2. Open Questions to Elicit Change Talk

Type of change talk	Question to elicit change talk
Desire	What would you like to work on? What do you hope to get out of our time together? What do you want to be different in your life? What do you hope would be better in your life if you did _____?
Ability	What are some changes you have made before? What are some difficult things you have done before? How confident are you that you can do this?
Reasons	Why would you want to make this change? What are the benefits of making this change? How important is it for you to do this? What do you think will happen if things stay the way they are? How has this been helpful before? Why?
Need	Why is this something you need to do? What is the best thing that could happen if you made a change? What is the most important reason for doing _____? Why?
Commitment	What is the first step you will take? What is one thing you can do in the next week? How committed are you to making this change? What steps have you already taken?

PRACTITIONER: Everyone is telling you what needs to change. What do *you* want? What part of your life feels less than perfect for you right now?

YOUNG PERSON: Well, I suppose my life would be better if my parents would get off my back. [Change talk]

PRACTITIONER: So you might consider making a change if it would reduce the hassle you experience with your parents. What would it take to make that happen? [Reflection, elaboration]

➤ TIP FOR DIRECT QUESTIONS: TAILOR QUESTIONS WITH WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW

By tailoring questions to elicit change talk based on what you already have learned about the young person, you further convey empathy and tie together the person-centered and goal-oriented components of MI. For example, in the case of Jenny, you might say, “You mentioned earlier that you tend to eat more when your mother fights with you. What do you think needs to change here?”

➔ **TIP FOR DIRECT QUESTIONS: ASK ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE'S CONCERNS
WHEN THE YOUNG PERSON REFUSES TO ACKNOWLEDGE ANY**

Inquiring about how others perceive the problem behavior can elicit change talk. You can then follow up with reflections and explore any sense of uneasiness they may be experiencing, drawing parallels between how others feel and their own views about change.

PRACTITIONER: What is it about your behavior that other people might see as a reason for concern?

TRAVIS: Well I'm not sure they have a reason, but my parents are worried about what the doctor said.

PRACTITIONER: So your parents are worried about you.

TRAVIS: Yeah, they keep saying I'm gonna have a heart attack someday like my grandfather.

Now the practitioner can tie others' concerns to the young person's point of view.

PRACTITIONER: So they care about you and are worried about heart problems since there is a family history. What do you think?

TRAVIS: Well, I am fine right now, but I guess sometimes I wonder if I might end up like him down the road. [Change talk]

PRACTITIONER: There is a part of you that wonders if you will end up with heart problems and the drugs might make it worse. [Reflection]

Alternatively, if others' concerns are not sufficient to elicit a discussion about the young person's potential reasons to change, some young people respond to questions that consider the effects of the target behavior on significant others.

TRAVIS: I am fine right now, and I wish they [parents, friends] would not worry so much.

PRACTITIONER: So you are not sure this is an issue, but you don't like them [parents, friends] worrying. What could you do to reduce their worry?

TRAVIS: Well, I guess I could cut back on Adderall, but I am not gonna stop smoking weed. [Change talk]

PRACTITIONER: You know yourself best, and cutting back on Adderall is something you're considering. [Complex reflection with emphasizing autonomy]

Imagining Questions

By discussing imagined situations, you can explore the young person's goals and guide them to the path of change talk. Imagining extremes involves asking future-oriented questions pertaining to how life would be if the problematic behavior continues and/or is discontinued. For example, "What's the worst thing that might happen if you continue [insert problem behavior]?" and "What's the best thing that might happen if you decided to stop [insert problem behavior]?" Answers to these scenarios often resound of change talk. If the response is "nothing," consider this to be evidence of resistance in the relationship and roll with it (see Chapter 5).

A similar imagining approach involves asking the young person to imagine his or her life before the problem behavior existed. For example, "Looking back, tell me what your life was like before you started drinking." When inquiring about the past, you should allow for ample time to answer, and particularly for those young persons with a history of struggling to change the problematic behavior. Topics brought forth can provide new insights about what is actually important to the young person (and not just what you assumed). These topics can range from discussions about life being simpler as a child or experiencing less conflict with parents to noticing differences in appearance, health, and the like.

You can also ask the young person to look ahead by envisioning hopes for the future and considering how their current behaviors can help or hinder goal attainment. For example, "If you could fast-forward to a few years down the road, what would you see yourself doing, and how does your [problem behavior] fit with that goal, assuming nothing changes?" If the young person is not able to see that far ahead, try shorter windows of time: "What would your life look like one year from now?"

We have found the looking-forward strategy to be especially powerful because it instills hopefulness about how life may one day be different. However, we have also found this strategy to backfire, increasing the young person's resistance if you are not prepared to roll with *any and all* responses he or she may offer. For all of us working with young persons, it is easy to slip into the trap of giving unsolicited advice (i.e., warning about the hazards of their ideas, such as responding with statements such as "You'll end up in the hospital if you don't . . ."). However, these well-intentioned warnings often do little but evoke reactance and squelch the young person's hopes and dreams for the future, even if they are not realistic from your point of view.

PRACTITIONER: To help me understand more about you, I am wondering if you are willing to share how you see things in your future? What do you imagine life will be like, say, 5 years from now?

EUGENE: Well, I want to work with younger kids like in a school or camp.

PRACTITIONER: You are interested in working with children. You said you like to have fun, so I bet you would be good at it. How does taking your medication fit with this goal?

EUGENE: Well, I guess I have to be healthy to do that kind of work. Kids are sick a lot! [Change talk]

PRACTITIONER: So taking your medication will help you stay healthy and be able to work with kids.

By exploring the discrepancy between current behaviors and goals, the practitioner is guiding the youth to consider improving medication adherence.

➤ TIP FOR IMAGINING QUESTIONS: TRY AN ACTIVITY

Some young people may prefer to imagine beyond the use of verbal communications. For example, with permission, you can have the young person draw representations of “looking forward” and “looking back,” or act out scenes showing “the best case scenario if I change” and “worst case scenario if I don’t change.” These activities can take on a playful or serious tone, depending on the young person’s preferences.

Questions about Personal Strengths

There are several types of questions you can use to support the young person’s self-efficacy (see Chapter 7 for leveraging personal values). You can encourage stories regarding past change successes related either directly to the target behavior or to other difficult changes. For example, “You mentioned you managed to keep the job at the gas station even though nobody helped you with transportation. How did you overcome this challenge?” Similarly, you can inquire about personal strengths or social supports available to help with overcoming challenges (e.g., “Who helped you? What are the things you did that made a difference?”).

For the young person who does not easily identify personal strengths, you can explore what other people (friends, family) say about their strengths or good qualities. An Affirmation Card Sort activity may also help the young person identify these strengths. Akin to the values clarification exercise (see Chapter 7), the young person is first asked to choose qualities he or

she possesses (such as thoughtful, kind, strong) from a list or stack of cards. You then follow up with similar questions about how these qualities are currently evident in the young person's life, in relation to both past successes and possible behavior change options. For example, "You mentioned you've always been a strong person. How might being a strong person help you if you decided to do something about smoking?"

During this activity (and with all MI), you should convey your own hope and optimism regarding the young person's ability to change, as long as it is truly consistent with your belief. Research suggests that therapist optimism is a common factor evident in positive therapeutic outcomes (Lambert & Barley, 2001). For example, a practitioner might comment, "You have been really persistent in the past in trying to take your meds even though it has been so hard. This persistence can really pay off once you find the right strategy to help get back on meds."

Additional Strategies to Elicit Change Talk

Two additional strategies are commonly used to elicit change talk: rulers and feedback.

Rulers

Rulers are often incorporated into MI interventions (Miller & Rollnick, 2013), though we have found that asking about "readiness" may be too abstract for young clients. We prefer an importance ruler. After asking permission, you describe or show a picture of the ruler, with anchors of 1 as the lowest and 10 as the highest. You then ask the young person to rate the importance of making a change on the ruler on this scale from 1 to 10: "How important is it to you to change [problematic behavior]?" It is helpful to explain the point scale. For example, explain to your client, "Some young people feel quitting drugs is not at all important and would give it a rating of 1. Other people believe this is the most important thing and would rate it a 10. Others might be in the middle, like a 4, 5, or 6. Where are you at?"

After the young person chooses a number, for example, 4, your first task is to reflect the response and provide a contextual meaning for the chosen value (e.g., "You are somewhere in the middle. Changing this behavior might be important but maybe isn't your top priority"). Second, you should ask about why the young person did not choose a lower number ("Tell me why are you are a 4 and not a 1 or a 2"). By inquiring about lower numbers, you increase the likelihood that the young person will respond with change talk. That is, you are guiding him or her to defend a position in favor of

change, rather than argue against it. They might say, “Well, I know eventually I have to stop using drugs, but I am not sure I want to right now.” However, if you had instead asked, “Why were you a 4 and not a higher number?” you would have guided the young person to argue for reasons against change (“I really like smoking and it helps me to relax”). These slight shifts in your communication provide a critical distinction and tool for eliciting change talk instead of encouraging sustain talk. Note that if the person responds that they are a 1 on the ruler, this is a clue for you to return to strategies to respond to sustain talk (Chapter 5).

➡ TIP FOR RULERS: TRY THE RULER FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHANGE TALK

The ruler strategy may be used for other types of change talk, particularly ability (recall that readiness to change is a function of importance and ability). In a confidence ruler, the young person rates confidence in his or her ability to change on a 10-point scale. You might respond, “You say you are a 7. Though you are not 100% sure, you are pretty confident you could do this if you wanted to. Why are you a 7 and not a lower number?” Similar to the importance ruler, exploring confidence with the scale elicits change talk, with the focus on personal abilities to change. Another possibility to promote engagement in treatment is to ask the young person to rate how they feel about coming to treatment (e.g., how much they want to come, how important it is to come, how confident they feel in being able to work with you). When you ask why the young person chose that number and not a lower number, you elicit reasons to engage in treatment!

➡ TIP FOR RULERS: TRY ASKING WHAT IT WOULD TAKE TO GET TO A HIGHER NUMBER

The question “What would it take to get to a higher number?” also elicits change talk by requiring the young person to think about making a change without having to commit yet.

PRACTITIONER: You said you were about a 5 in how ready you are to start exercising. Sort of ready, but you’re not sure. What would it take for you to be a higher number?

JENNY: I guess if I could find something I like, I might be higher. I hated everything I’ve tried so far.

PRACTITIONER: So if you found something you liked, you might consider exercising. You mentioned you used to dance. How do you feel about dancing now?

Personalized and Normative Feedback

There is some evidence to suggest that brief MI with young people that included feedback of assessment results had stronger effects on behavior change than brief MI without feedback (Walters, Vader, Harris, Field, & Jouriles, 2009). Personalized feedback involves presenting factual information about the young person's specific experiences with the target behavior, with the goals of increasing concern and developing discrepancy between the target behavior and the young person's goals/values. The information comes either from objective assessments (e.g., lab results, urine screens) or from the young person's own self-report rather than from the subjective reports of others. Normative feedback is a strategy where you compare the young person's results with statistical data on similar young people (e.g., "You said you started having sex at 15, and everybody your age is doing it. I have some data here on when other teenagers are starting to have sex").

Using the Ask–Tell–Ask approach (described in Chapter 4), you will provide only facts, without judgment or your analysis of the results. Recall that interpretation of feedback is the young person's task, not yours. Recall Sam with anxiety who drinks to relax in social situations.

PRACTITIONER: What would you like to know about the questionnaires you completed?

SAM: I was wondering what it was all about. I really don't drink that much.

PRACTITIONER: Based on your report, if you add up the days you drank, you said you drank 20 out of the last 30 days for a total of 100 drinks. How does that fit with your thoughts about your drinking?

SAM: Well, I guess I did not realize I was drinking that much almost every day.

PRACTITIONER: You are wondering if you are drinking more than you realized.

SAM: Yeah, I'm OK with drinking, but I don't want to be a daily drinker. [Change talk]

PRACTITIONER: Being a daily drinker does not fit with who you want to be. [Reflection of discrepancy]

Personalized feedback simply summarizes the person's assessment results. In contrast, *normative* feedback facilitates the young person's comparison of him- or herself with similar others using population data (i.e., age, gender, race, etc.). For example, "You reported drinking about 20 drinks per week. Would you be interested in knowing how your use compares with others your age? This study here shows that male college students drink an

average of nine drinks per week.” In providing information, some young persons may respond better to visual presentation (see Chapter 9), and using relevant norms specific to the young person (race, gender, age, geographic region) is key. If information is not available or is not specific to the young person, it is better to present personalized feedback instead. For example, young persons with HIV may not pay attention to normative substance use data from young people without HIV. Some young people may reject being presented with normative data, as they may perceive themselves to be different from the norm, do not consider the behavior as a problem, and/or are not ready to make any changes. For example, “These data are old; everybody I know drinks as much as me.” The young person may even question results from the objective assessment or the self-report questionnaires (i.e., “This can’t be right, these questions are stupid anyway”). As with all forms of sustain talk, you can roll with these statements and further explore how the adolescent interprets their problematic behavior. For example, “OK, so as you see it, the assessment was not right. How much do you think you have been drinking, and what do you make of it?” In this way, you emphasize your respect for the young person’s point of view while continuing to implement other, more relevant strategies.

A recent study (Davis, Houck, Rowell, Benson, & Smith, 2016) suggested that normative feedback is most associated with behavior change when change talk is already frequent and can be detrimental when change talk is not. Thus, we recommend you be cautious with timing and use normative feedback when you have already heard and reinforced change talk.

Summary

Do not worry about memorizing types of change talk. Instead, focus on recognizing any change talk and get in the habit of automatically reinforcing it with reflections or requests for elaboration, decide which strategies to elicit change talk fit with your personal style, and always be on the lookout for bumps in the road with young people, as counter-change talk and discord may arise at any time (see Chapter 5). The dialogue below shows how eliciting and reinforcing change talk with open questions and reflections flow in a conversation.

JENNY: My mother nags at me all the time, and it’s not as easy as she thinks. If she got off my back I might do a lot better [Ability to change], but the arguments we have are just too much; they just make me want to eat more.

PRACTITIONER: You might do a lot better with following your eating

plan if you and your mother would stop fighting. [Action reflection]

JENNY: Yeah, all day long she hassles me about what I ate. It makes me want to just quit this whole thing, but I really want to lose some weight before summer. [Desire for change]

PRACTITIONER: You really want to do this before the summer. [Simple reflection] Tell me more about why you want to lose weight before summer. [Question to elaborate change talk]

JENNY: All the kids hang out outside in shorts and T-shirts. When it is hot, I won't go because I don't want to wear clothes that show my fat. [Reasons for change]

PRACTITIONER: It's great that you want to lose weight so you can go outside and be with the other kids. [Affirming reflection] What would it look like if your mother would support you instead of fighting with you so that you reach your goal? [Open-ended question—looking forward]

JENNY: Well, she just needs to leave me alone because I really need to make this plan work. [Need for change] Maybe she could just check in with me at the end of the day, but I am not sure she would do it.

PRACTITIONER: You have some great ideas here. [Affirming reflection] When you fight with your mom, you want to eat more. This upsets you because you really want to lose weight so you are more comfortable hanging out with your friends this summer. Your idea is to talk to your mother about only checking in with you about eating at the end of the day. [Summarizing reflection]

While change talk may be the map of change, MI spirit is the necessary scenery. The elicitation and reinforcement of change talk within a foundation of partnership, acceptance, compassion, and evocation is the key to MI. We suggest direct questions to elicit desire, ability, reasons, and need (we will discuss commitment language in the next chapter). We note that emphasizing autonomy and experiential activities are especially useful with young people. We also note that while we prefer open questions, multiple-choice questions and even closed questions can still be used to elicit change talk. We simplify previous conceptualization of MI by addressing the reinforcement of change talk with simple and complex reflections, emphasizing that affirming and summarizing are main types of complex reflections. Table 6.3 summarizes change talk dos and don'ts, while Table 6.4 describes adaptations for special populations.

TABLE 6.3. Recognizing, Eliciting, and Reinforcing Change Talk: Dos and Don'ts

Do	Don't
<p><i>Recognize and reinforce</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All change talk, regardless of type. • Elaboration of youth's cons and pros that reinforce/enhance change talk. 	<p><i>Neglect</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to reflect change talk. • A cautious pause before you respond. • Evoking counter-change talk versus change talk will create barriers for youth to discuss change possibilities.
<p><i>Gently pull</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend to the flow of conversation with open-ended questions. • Pull out change talk from the jaws of youth's ambivalence using change talk reflections—it can lead to clearer streams that flush out ambivalence. 	<p><i>Force and get stuck</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Force responses with closed-ended questions and reinforce discord language. • Reinforce counter-change talk with reflections of discord—it can lead to murky waters where the jaws of ambivalence clamp shut.
<p><i>Vary creative reflections</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vary types/frequency of reflections. • Be creative in reflecting change talk. • When you creatively use reflective change talk, you pave the road for youth to explore new territories in considering options on their path of change. 	<p><i>Be one-sided or use common reflections</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect only one side of ambivalence. • Use commonly overused stems. • "It sounds like . . ." • When you generically reflect change talk, you can stagnate change processes by conveying to youth their voice in change is not special.
<p><i>Avoid inflections</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect with mindful attention to vocal intonation. End your responses with neutral tone. • Attend to intonation—neutral intonations offer guidance on how the youth may respond to a question or response to your reflection. 	<p><i>Waste a reflection</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turn reflections into questions. • End responses with a concerto of vocal tones—doing that offers a window for youth to jump out of the conversation and disengage when it's unclear how they might respond to you.
<p><i>Be creative</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use open-ended questions to elicit change talk, not counter-change talk. 	<p><i>Be boring</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use closed-ended questions or interrogate with a series of questions.
<p><i>Balance ratios</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance ratios of questions with reflections—tailor both to change talk. 	<p><i>Forget to reflect</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sacrifice opportunities to respond to change talk by taking the "easy road," using closed-ended questions and counter-change talk reflections.
<p><i>Use rulers—for hope</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus rulers exercise to elicit hope. • Use the road less traveled option— inquire about "low numbers" that will evoke change talk. 	<p><i>Use rulers to tank hope</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use rulers exercise to tank hope. • Offer a "why isn't the grass greener?" option by inquiring about "higher numbers," forcing youth to focus on pessimism and barriers to change.

(cont.)

TABLE 6.3. (cont.)

Do	Don't
<p><i>Use Ask–Tell–Ask</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate change talk into feedback using the Ask–Tell–Ask strategy. 	<p><i>Defend and data dump</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak “the truth” or offer research data/statistics of interest to only you. • Dump irrelevant information/factoids on the young person—it will hinder change processes further.
<p><i>Specifically affirm</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affirm specific change efforts with concrete behavioral terms. • Use <i>You</i> sentence stems. • “You completed your homework and feel great about it!” 	<p><i>Generically affirm</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer generic and overly enthusiastic affirmations too quickly. • Use <i>I</i> statements in sentence stems. • “I think it’s a fantastic job!”
<p><i>Summarize periodically</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be purposeful in choosing opportunities to present a collection of reflections, link themes, and transition to other foci of change. 	<p><i>Haphazardly summarize</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stray too far from the person’s statements and offer random summary statements.

TABLE 6.4. Tips for Change Talk with Special Populations

Special populations may . . .	MI tip	MI response sounds like . . .
	<u>Criminal justice</u>	
Avoid responding to change talk reflections in an honest manner when fearing external contingencies: “Yeah, I hear you. But if I really talk about this—will you tell my parole officer?”	Use omission reflections. Highlighting realistic fears about what the youth discloses can enhance youth’s trust in you and facilitate change talk.	“Being scared to freely talk about changing—there’s a risk—your ideas may not be supported by everyone.”
Question your authority when you prematurely focus on change talk: “Don’t try using that psychobabble on me. Please don’t waste your time . . .”	Drop the expert role. Step back and reflect prior change talk statements when encountering “don’t” statements.	“It’s important for us to focus on your own goals and not the ones other people make for you.”

Special populations may . . .	MI tip	MI response sounds like . . .
<u>Eating disorders</u>		
<p>Respond well to reinforcement of change talk with dietary compliance efforts, although it may not sound like “typical” change talk: “All I had to do was just drink this crappy electrolyte drink and eat a couple extra bites?”</p> <p>Appear “coy” in responding to questions about difficulties with change efforts: “I forgot to write down the meal diary we made . . . my iPhone crashed this week—I at least got that fixed.”</p>	<p>Listen for novel change talk statements. Reflect all small changes maximizing healthy efforts—even when they include a question.</p> <p>Tie in reflections of other change efforts broadly related to health. Use opportunities to reflect change about any/all health-seeking efforts supporting the goals of treatment.</p>	<p>“Sometimes the efforts you’ve made to avoid change can make you actually work harder than doing it.”</p> <p>“Getting your phone fixed is important to helping you track your meals on the calendar. How might you use it to track on the diary, or are there other ways you might want to include your phone to help you monitor your changes?”</p>
<u>Neurodevelopmental conditions</u>		
<p>Appear to “ignore you” if your change talk reflections are long-winded.</p> <p>May repeat your phrases while digesting your overly worded phrases: “Change, change, change?”</p> <p>Get fatigued and frustrated with you when faced with multiple change talk questions and reflections: “You ask too many questions! What do you want me to do?”</p>	<p>Simplify your reflections and demonstration of MI spirit.</p> <p>Be specific and simple in eliciting change talk. Direct questions versus strategic questions may be best. Apologize if you have confused the young person.</p>	<p>“Change, yes. It’s something you want to do.”</p> <p>“My fault—too many questions at once. What are some reasons <i>you</i> want to take these medicines.”</p>

(cont.)

TABLE 6.4. (cont.)

Special populations may . . .	MI tip	MI response sounds like . . .
<u>Sexual health</u>		
<p>Express concerns about consequences of relationships when changing sexual practices: “I bought the condoms and put one on for us—surprised him with a rainbow-colored one! Neither one of us liked it as much.”</p>	<p>Combine emphasizing autonomy with affirmations and double-sided reflections.</p>	<p>“There are some hurdles and you made a big change for your own health and he’s still on board to support you too.”</p>
<p>Explore different safe sexual practices all at once that may compromise risk and ask your opinion: “I’m trying it all right now. Monday I took the pill, Tuesday we tried condoms, Wednesday . . . well I forget what happened . . . , but on Thursday I started my period and we didn’t need to use anything. I’m finally doing these changes! What do you think?”</p>	<p>Use Ask–Tell–Ask to offer feedback in an MI-consistent manner to support change when potential sexual health risks can be minimized.</p>	<p>“You’ve made a lot of new updates and are excited about these changes. What do you know about the risks of pregnancy when you use different birth control methods every day?”</p>
<u>Opiate addiction</u>		
<p>Hesitate to respond to your reflections of change talk and fear the unknown—of biological withdrawal (including concerns for obtaining opioids if not prescribed): “Give me a second . . . I’m not sure what I’d feel like if I stopped using.”</p>	<p>Give slower-paced verbal responses to change talk statements. Recognize how physiological/cognitive withdrawal symptoms may alter cognitive processes and youth’s verbal responses.</p>	<p>“Let’s slow it down; these are important decisions you are making.”</p>
<p>Display heightened sensitivity and overly emotional responses when your change talk questions involve longer-term goals not matching youth’s short-term goals: “You keep asking me about what my life will be like when I’m not hooked on this stuff. I’m just trying to think how I’ll make it through this week and not use!”</p>	<p>Refocus on short-term changes as youth with a longer history of opioid use may have greater difficulties committing to longer-term changes. Tailoring questions to evoke change talk for short-term goals can enhance self-efficacy and makes committing to longer-term goals more attainable.</p>	<p>“Taking the time to think about how to make the next change is as important as taking time out to think when you feel like using.”</p>