

Empowering Youth as Active Participants

Tip Sheet

Empowering out of school youth as active participants in programming requires innovative approaches and the ability to think outside the box. Team #2 worked together to share best practices and brainstorm new ideas and approaches to working with youth. Their goal was to allow for flexibility by having at hand a variety of strategies and tools.

Below is a summary of resources and techniques that are available for staff, as well as examples of putting these suggestions in action. This document is a starting point to explore new ideas, revisit old ones and to more effectively use available resources.

Survey Questions

Initial meetings with youth are a great opportunity to begin the engagement and empowerment process. All too often, jumping right into intake questions that are demoralizing or challenging shuts youth down or reinforces the power differential between participants and staff. The team found that before jumping right into “interview” questions, starting off their first conversation with questions that encourage a young person to think creatively and feel comfortable, can be a powerful tool to building a relationship and partnership. Here are some sample questions:

- If you could pick a superpower, what would you choose and why?
- If you could be any animal, what would you be and why?
- If you could visit anywhere in the world you’ve never been, where would you go?
- What are you passionate about?
- What hobbies do you enjoy doing?
- What’s your favorite movie? Book? Television show?
- If you were a crayon, what color would you be? Why?
- What’s the most helpful way for you to get feedback?
- Do you have a favorite family tradition? What is it?
- Describe a challenging situation you’ve been in and explain how you dealt with it?
- What is one important skill or attribute every person should have?
- Name two things you consider yourself to be good at.
- What is one of the things on your bucket list?
- What do you enjoy doing to relieve stress?
- If you could only take one physical item with you on a deserted island, what would it be?
- Do you have a role model? Explain why they are your role model.
- What are you passionate about and why?
- Who and what matters to you?
- Who will be proud of you when you meet your goals?
- What is the story you tell yourself of “where you’ve been”? What story do you want to be living?
- What motivates you? Who motivates you?

- What's the biggest road block you are experiencing right now, if any?
- What does having a meaningful life look like for you?

Personality Assessments

Personality assessments are a useful way for a youth to better understand their personality characteristics or tendencies and for the staff to understand how best to work and communicate with them. Below is a list of useful resources:

- Myers-Briggs Test: <https://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test>
- Big-Five Theory Test: <https://www.scienceofpeople.com/personality/>
- DISC Personality Test: <https://www.123test.com/disc-personality-test/>
- Grit-Scale Test: <https://angeladuckworth.com/grit-scale/>

Staff Notes

1. Ensure proper self-care techniques before and after meetings
2. Create a consistent, positive environment throughout all staff and services
3. Pay attention to your pace and try not to forge ahead into problem solving, meet the youth where they are at
4. Pay attention to non-verbal communication and micro-expressions from the participant
5. Utilize motivational interviewing techniques as seen on:
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK64964/>

Motivational Interviewing (MI) Overview and Techniques

(Based on a training done by Prevention and Early Intervention Well(ness)essity Program from OCAPICA - <https://www.ocapica.org/mental-health/>)

- Miller and Rollnick conceptualized lack of motivation as an experience of being “stuck” in ambivalence. Ambivalence is a normal state that affects many areas of one’s life.
- MI is a counseling style that elicits behavioral change by helping clients explore and resolve their ambivalence
- Motivation to change is elicited from the client, and not imposed from the outside
- It is the participant’s task, not the staff’s, to articulate and resolve his or her ambivalence
- Staff are the ‘navigators’, so we have to work with them to “name the issue, or the ambivalence” in their own words
- Direct persuasion is not an effective method to resolve ambivalence
- Readiness to change is not a participant trait, but a fluctuating product of interpersonal interactions
- The therapeutic relationship is more like a partnership/companionship role than expert/recipient role; “they are the expert in their own lives”
- Their interactions with you might help them in a different capacity that you might not immediately see, or ever see, trust the process.

DEARS – Five Basic Principles of MI:

- **D-Develop discrepancy**
 - Explore the difference between where the youth is at the moment and where he/she wants to be; if the youth is able to verbalize the discrepancy, they are more likely to take some sort of action to change; maybe there is some anxiety/fear attached to getting a job
- **E-Express empathy**
 - Maintain an attitude of acceptance, let the youth know that their perspective is understandable, comprehensible, and valid
- **A-Avoid argumentation**
 - Arguments evoke resistance from youth
- **R-Roll with resistance**
 - Reluctance + ambivalence are acknowledged as being normal and natural
- **S-Support self-efficiency**
 - A person's belief in his or her ability to carry out and succeed w/ a specific task

AROSE – Five Basic Skills of MI:

- **A – Affirmations**
 - Statements that encourage, reinforce, and acknowledge appropriate attempts by the youth; they might not always meet the goals they set, but it is good to acknowledge the hard work they are doing and have done
- **R- Reflective Listening**
 - Reflection of feeling, critical to attempt to understand the gist, and the real meaning of what the youth is communicating; ex: "it sounds like you.."; or "based on what you've said, it sounds like maybe you are feeling...is that correct?"; "May I make an observation?"; listening is a hard skill but showing interest in what the youth has to say and respect for the youth's inner wisdom is important
- **O- Open-Ended Questions**
 - Questions that can't be answered with a yes or no; ex: "What can I do for you today? What are you getting out of this relationship? What does having a meaningful life look like for you?"
- **S- Summarizing**
 - Special application of reflective listening that links together discussed material, demonstrates careful listening, and prepares youth to move to action steps, a transitional summary is a recap of what the meeting was about and what the steps moving forward are, making sure to clarify to the youth that "it is totally up to you if you want to do this"
- **E- Eliciting Change Talk**
 - Direct youth to discuss their ambivalence about changing a particular behavior; Change talk is the youth expressing at least one of the following; desire to change, reason to change, need to change, commitment to change

Field Notes

Below are some examples of scenarios using methods to empower youth:

Scenario #1:

A participant came in to meet with me as the Workforce Specialist to complete his ISP (Individual Service Plan). The ISP meeting is the initial meeting with me, after filling out the application for the program. I opened with, "Hi ____, it is great to see you today, I am glad you came in." This is a change from instead of just saying, "Hi, how are you?" since that sometimes puts people on auto pilot. The new approach builds rapport and trust by repeating the participant's name. This starts with an affirmation and allows space for open-ended communication. I let the participant know the purpose of the meeting (to set educational and career goals and learn more about what he needs from the program/what the program offers) and then I opened with some of the questions that we came up with in our survey list. I asked him what his superpower would be and we had a back and forth relaxed conversation. Then I asked him, "What motivates you?" He then replied, "Beating my biological past motivates me. I am sober now 5 months!" He went on to tell me about his sobriety journey.

The conversation deepened and I asked him, "Who motivates you? And who will be proud of you when you meet your goals?" He mentioned his grandmother would be proud of him and that he would be proud of himself. This tells me that he is still connected to a family member, even though he is experiencing homelessness. It also tells me that he is working towards meeting his own goals for personal fulfillment and not necessarily because he "has to" for probation, etc. These questions led us down a great conversational path, to talk about employment, career, and educational goals due to being able to tie in where he is at in life, what matters to him, and where he wants to grow. He did most of the talking and I was able to thread in my ISP questions naturally. We have had three meetings since that initial meeting and I have been able to ask some check-in questions, based on what he initially told me. He is now 7 months sober and I congratulated him on that!

He also opened up and told me that he lost the two jobs he had been offered due to a court issue. I worked with him on coming up with a Plan B for his situation, and I reinforced that it was good he felt comfortable being honest about what happened so that program services could better meet his needs. He is job searching on his own now, after gathering some interview tips from me, and I hope to continue building rapport with him. He is scheduled to come in to meet with me in the middle of next month to check in on how his job search is going. This scenario is important because it highlights the roller coaster of the participant's journey over the course of a couple weeks and how as staff we can go along for the ride – and be useful and encouraging parts of the ride!

Scenario #2:

Walking into the Department of Labor and Regulation in Aberdeen, South Dakota can be a common thing for individuals if they are seeking services that revolve around jobs. This process can appear to be easy or difficult; depending on the type of individual you are. On this specific day a probation officer called to inform me about an individual who needed additional services that the Department of Labor and Regulation could provide. "She is a young girl who needs to obtain a job rather quickly or she will end up going to jail and be released for job seeking purposes only" her probation officer exclaimed.

Upon meeting her, she was unsure what she was interested in doing. All she stated was, "I just want a job so my probation officer gets off my back and I can start paying off my restitution bills." After utilizing some of the questions and activities created by our cohort team she opened up to me; she opened her thoughts to not just getting "a job" but looking at a career that will give her purpose and a quality income.

Some of the questions I used to open her mind to think about more than just 'the here and now' were silly and some were more serious; they are as follows: If you were a crayon what color would you be? If you could be any super hero who would it be and why? If you could choose any super power what would it be? What are you passionate about? What do you feel are your most important skills? What do you do when you feel stressed? I did ask her more questions, however, the one that seemed to impact her the most was - How do you feel I would be able to uplift you the most in this journey of finding a job together? I discovered due to negative circumstances in her life, she was never asked what she wanted or how things would affect her or her life. This seemed to be why she entered the criminal courts, to gain attention and help her family the only way she thought she could. Once she felt comfortable talking to me and really searched what she was interested in doing we worked as a team to get her hired at a full-time job where she is making over \$12.75 hourly with benefits.

I have found that working with these questions and others alike, as well as trying to keep our appointments for a shorter time much more beneficial than in the past. Youth are opening up to me faster and we are able to search together for a career, not just a job.

Scenario #3:

The participant came to meet with me to complete a required "Time Management Workshop". Prior to starting, I provided a firm and solid handshake while maintaining eye contact with him to express mutual trust. Eye contact for at least 60% of the conversation allows both staff and participant to have more of a connection and encourages engagement. Instead of asking the typical "how are you?" I chose to ask the participant if they are working on any personal passion projects that bring excitement into their life. He proceeded to discuss his endeavors of working on cars and studying different models which gave him the opportunity to speak about himself. When someone speaks about him or herself a chemical in the brain called dopamine is produced which further allows the participant to associate staff or the organization with a positive sensation. Afterwards, I transitioned to conducting the workshop (Time Management). Throughout the workshop I encouraged him to not try to change their personality orientation, rather "work with how they are wired" to set their days up for success. Not all people work well with post-it notes, highlighters, and a personal planner by their side; this can be anxiety provoking for some. Self-awareness allows an individual to optimize themselves by creating an ideal environment or situation to be their most productive. I ended the workshop by delivering a personality test that shows levels of neuroticism, openness, conscientiousness, extroversion/introversion, and agreeableness. I affirmed that no certain personality type is above another and that understanding who you are and how you can potentially react to situation is one of the most powerful tools to enhancing productivity within a day.