

University at Buffalo School of Social Work inSocialWork Podcast Series

Why Motivational Interviewing Matters Beyond the Therapy Room

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Todd Sage [00:00:06] Welcome to In Social Work. I'm your host, Todd Sage. Most of us learn motivational interviewing as one tool among many tools. Motivational interviewing and CVT tend to go together. Motivation interviewing and DVT are found together. It seems like it's always something that we layer on top of whatever else we're trained in. However, Bill Miller and Steven Rolnick, the inventors of motivational interviewing, as we know it today, have said for years that motivational interviewing can stand on its own, and yet very few practices are actually built that way. My guest today did exactly that. Tessa Bechtold Brown is a licensed mental health counselor and member of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers and founder of motivational counseling here in Western New York. She has built a practice organized around motivational interviewing, not just as a technique, but as a way of being. In little over a year, it has grown to a team of nearly 14 clinicians practicing this way. Tessa and I go way back. We've co-presented on trauma-informed motivational interviewing at the Mint Forum in Christchurch, New Zealand. But in this conversation, we get into what it takes to build a practice around the spirit of motivational interviewing. And what does organizational culture in the field that struggles with things like burnout and turnover actually do when motivational interviewing is present in those settings? What motivational interviewing actually looks like with clients who do not choose to be in the room. And so here is my conversation with Tessa. All right. So Tessa, I'm so glad to be able to have you on our podcast today and kind of introduce you to the social work world because you're somebody that I have always admired and we share a love together of this thing that we call motivational interviewing. And so I think the best way for us to start off is just if you could share with our listeners who obviously may not know you yet, a little bit about who you are, your educational background and how you came to Motivational Interviewing and more importantly, how you created this thing that we're here to talk about today which is your Motivation Interviewing Counseling Center. And so let's just start there.

Tessa Bechtold [00:02:26] Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for having me too, Todd. I know we go way back with MI Consulting and it's such an honor to be a part of this conversation. So a little of my background, I am a licensed mental health counselor who also happens to be member of mint or motivational or interviewing network of trainers. And that journey is what kind of inspired me to create that community that we have here at Motivational Counseling.

Todd Sage [00:02:59] Yeah, and just I'll kind of expand a little bit for our audience on what meant is, as Tessa said, it's the motivational interviewing network of trainers and and kind of what it is. It's a it's a formal organization that after you've kind of learned your motivational interviewing and you've been. You've been doing it out there and what I like to call the wild for a while. You can apply to kind of go back and get formally trained as a as a

MIP member and and so that's kind of how you and I came to know each other a little bit, and we have this great community of other MET trainers around us, and we'll share a little more of that as we talk about motivational interviewing as we go back. As you mentioned, you and do go back a little bit, we co-presented on trauma-informed motivational interviewing, the MET forum in Christchurch, New Zealand, which was really cool. That leads me to the question of, What pulled you towards this thing? Of motivational interviewing. Why motivational interviewing when there's so many other modalities out there that a practitioner like you could be doing.

Tessa Bechtold [00:04:04] I was lucky enough to stumble upon Motivational Interviewing at a local nonprofit in the Western York area, Horizon Health Services. So I had taken a two-day introductory MI course with fellow Minty, Dr. Joshua Mora, and I never looked back. It felt to me like putting a name to a lot of what just felt authentic and natural and, and how I wanted to walk alongside my clients.

Todd Sage [00:04:36] And I love that kind of expression that you just shared because it's something that as practitioners of motivational interviewing, we talk a lot about is that walking alongside clients because a lot of other modalities out there are really more guiding, are pulling in nature. And motivational interviewing really is about taking the journey alongside with our clients. And so through this training, you kind of found. Your natural way of being with how you want it to practice, it sounds like.

Tessa Bechtold [00:05:10] Like many things in my life, it was never really a part of a grand plan. For me it was just kind of following my intuition and step by step moving towards what felt right or was interesting to me, what felt passionate or a pull. And all of those paths for me led to motivational interviewing and being able to create something that I felt like wasn't in our area as much. Clinical-wise.

Todd Sage [00:05:41] Yeah, and so that absolutely leads me to kind of the next thing that I'm curious about. And I'm sure some folks listening to this podcast are gonna be curious about is kind of the founding of the center that you created your practice center that that's built off of motivational interviewing. You know, a lot of clinicians dream about building something of their own and what it's like to kind have their own practice. But a lot a lot of us don't take that leap I for one have never taken that that leap personally. Can you kind of walk us through how your Motivational Review and Counseling Center came to be? And what was the moment that really kind of was that aha moment that said I'm going to do this and I'm gonna create this because it's needed?

Tessa Bechtold [00:06:24] I realized that there wasn't the space that offered similar counseling centered around celebrating and practicing MI. And I thought that maybe if that felt right for me, that maybe other people would want to be a part of something like that as well. And excitingly, there has been a lot of people that want to celebrate it just as much. We're moving towards a team of I think 14 now. So yeah. Somehow a lot of this is just very much, I'm very humbled by all of this turning into what it has because it was never again, a part of that grand plan but everything just keeps on feeling like it's falling into place that just like being authentic and building a community of people around you that are also interested in it. It just has been kind of falling into a place.

Todd Sage [00:07:24] Well, and that says a lot about a couple of things, right? It says a lot about kind of what you've put together, but it also shares a lot about kind of what MI brings to the table because in a time when lots of mental health organizations struggle to find practitioners, you know, here you are at 14 and continuing to grow and it really says a lot

about how we as social workers and mental health practitioners how we get into this role and we get into this work to really do the human side of the job and how, in many ways, motivational interviewing is that mechanism that allows us to have that human connection and do the human's side of work. And so while you're surprised, I'm kind of not surprised at how attractive it is for people to just want to come be part of this center that you've created. And really have that genuine human connection with their clients, you know, as you know well, and our listeners know well. Right? You know, the therapeutic relationship is such an integral part of healing and moving forward and dealing with trauma and things like that. And to have a place that allows you to have that connection with clients is a really powerful tool, not just for the clinicians that are around you, but for the clients are serving. So let's just kind of stay focused on this building of your center. What does it mean to build a practice that is explicitly organized around motivational interviewing, rather than just being another tool? You know, in school, you know, we talk a lot about MI and CBT, MI and DBT, you cycle analytical theory, right? And motivational interviewing is unique in its way that it can be an addition to You But you've really kind of taken it the other direction, which, you know, Rollnick and Miller are, you know, that the godfathers of motivational viewing have always said that it can be a standalone tool. But for whatever reason, historically, practitioners have always used it adjacent to other tools. And here you are having a center that's really put it in the forefront. And that's not to say you don't use other tools, but you've already deliberately said this is our main modality. So tell me a little bit about that.

Tessa Bechtold [00:09:46] It's at the heart of every thing we do. Or that's my intention or hope. Thinking about the sphere of motivational interviewing, that's every interaction with clients, that's interactions with colleagues. And that's maybe why too that we have grown so quickly over this last 13 months is because people feel seen and heard, not just the clients. It's a different culture in that way that maybe feels unique.

Todd Sage [00:10:23] Yeah, so you're talking about something that's really important and and you know for for folks that you know have been doing you know mental health, social work and the helping professions. We know that organizational culture matters, right? You could be the best therapist in the world. But if you don't feel welcome and supported within the organizational culture and how they practice the work that they're doing with the clients. You know, we get those those those dirty words that like burnout and and and compassion fatigue and all those other things that come with having a culture. The organizational culture that isn't as supportive. And you really talked about how you know your organizational culture is aligned with the core values of MI with the values of partnership affirmation affirming you know each other not just the clients we're working with or the patients but our peers, right? Because... Collaborative practice is so important. The conversations that clinicians have with each other in the hallways around difficult clients they're working with and how we have those conversations within the spirit of MI just allows us to not get that compassion fatigue and that burnout. And of course then we have the other elements of the spirit MI, which is the empowerment and just having overall compassion for the human condition. And so. It's really kind of this unique thing that you've created and it's inspirational to see from the outside looking in. And I know sometimes that might be hard to hear and take in, but it truly really is. So let's shift a little bit to what this actually looks like within your clinical setting when you're sitting with your clients. And so what a typical practitioner, whether a social worker or a licensed mental health clinician like you. Who is putting motivational interviewing kind of in the forefront of the work they're doing. When you're sitting with that client, how does MI actually show up and shape the room and shape what's happening within those encounters?

Tessa Bechtold [00:12:29] Thinking about a lot of what clients have shared with me, is that... Especially if they've had previous therapy experience, is that for them, it feels notably different in the sense of even just as much as entering the room, there's an energy shift. There's a feeling of comfort, safety, non-judgment, which of course is always a hope with any therapeutic experience. But what's unique is that I'm not prescribing or advising or directing what needs to happen. To fix or be this magic healer here. But I'm listening so intently in such a way that they're often surprised.

Todd Sage [00:13:17] Absolutely, and again, being a fellow lover and practitioner of MI, that's one of the things that really attracted me to MI early on, is that kind of release of, it's not my role to fix, right? That within our clients that we're working with, they have the motivation. They have the ability to take that journey. That doesn't mean that we don't have anything to offer along that journey, taking you back to your analogy of walking alongside, right? And saying, hey, we know that there's a pathway over here and let's go explore it together and see if that's the pathway for you. And so it is kind of a shift for a lot of clients because, as we talked earlier about a lot modalities being more directive, sometimes clients are taken aback by how much listening happens in the room versus talking. And it's interesting because when we talk to new practitioners of MI, sometimes that's the scariest part for them is like, what do I do with this silence? What do I deal with just this active listening? And you really brought it back to this place of safety. When clients feel heard, they feel safe. And that allows us to really start to begin the work of the healing that they're coming to us for. So as we as we kind of continue on here and thinking about MI practice, you work with a lot of kind of issues around South Worth, codependency, relationships are always something we as mental health practitioners deal a lot with. When we're thinking about the self and working with others. How does MI help someone start to look inward and name what they actually need? Because as we know, a lot of times they come to us, we got our degrees hanging on the wall and they're like, Tessa, tell me what to do. Tell me what's wrong, right? And MI is a little bit different approach where it's like, well, what do you think is wrong? What do you think you need to work on? How do you do that within this practice?

Tessa Bechtold [00:15:23] Yeah, I mean, that silent feeling or energy shift or a non-judgment really kind of offers like a feeling of self-compassion. Maybe even like allowing clients to be able to be open and willing to explore in those difficult topics within themselves with a place of curiosity. And for some, they might even describe it as life-changing. But it's really just fundamentally Am I as a way of? Being with people that honor some and where they're at.

Todd Sage [00:15:56] Absolutely. And you know, having that at the forefront is so important because, again, kind of thinking back to when I was a young practitioner, and I'm sure you experienced this too, it can be hard to just honor people's power of choice, right? That like, you know maybe today's not the day for you to really want to move forward. And that's okay. We can still build this relationship and we can still you know do meaningful work together and when that day does come I'm that safe person that's not going to shame you that's, not going to judge you and we can then move forward and so that the idea of autonomy was really hard for me early on in my own practice because you know obviously we want the best for everybody we don't want people out there suffering and hurting but autonomy is also so important because a lot of our systems that that our patients and clients come and interact with. Strips away that power and choice and that autonomy. And one of the ways people gain the skills to overcome hard things is through autonomy. And so being able to sit with people in those spaces and honor that autonomy and honor their choices in the moment is very therapeutic all into itself. And so that's, again, that's one of

the things I love about what you're doing and helping people gain a capacity to. To deal with hard things that come in their life just through the simple concept of autonomy. Some of the work that you also do is around, you know, substance use, grief and loss. And these can feel like very different type of spaces to be in. And how does MI really travel in those areas? When we talk about, you know, you know, things, you know, MI started in the substance abuse world. So a lot of people just kind of say, yeah, that's where it But know, the dynamics related to the different reasons people abuse substances and, and of course, you know, grief and loss is something we're all going to experience in our lifetime, whether it's it's through broken relationships or loss of a loved one, and the dying process and things like that. How do we navigate that with motivational interviewing? What's your approach in doing that?

Tessa Bechtold [00:18:13] So substance use treatment and grief and loss, they both continued to embody that spirit of MI for me. And even just, you know, as we're discussing autonomy support, I think of a lot of the individuals that I worked alongside that were on federal probation, parole, Buffalo Drug Court, Buffalo Mental Health Court, DWIs, mandated not wanting to be there. And at the same time, really honoring what they want. And so if that means wanting to be done with court and get them off your back, you know, I'll support you in any way that that looks like and, and what's really important to you too. We all have values. And so what are your guiding values? What's most important to you? What is not important to So those two are probably the guiding light maybe for me. And with grief and loss, I will say that there's less guiding and more following, in my experience, depends on what that person needs in the moment. And often they just need space. And someone that cares to kind of metaphorically sit and hold their hand with them.

Todd Sage [00:19:28] Absolutely. And it's one of the guiding principles of, you know, and, you know, motivational interviewing isn't alone in using the stages of change, but stages of changes really foundational to motivational interviewing. And so one of their common phrases we say a lot in our motivational interviewing practice is really about meeting the client where they're at, right? And so really what you're talking about is sometimes, you know, that external motivation of I just want the court off my back and, you know, my probation officer to leave me alone, right? Motivational and allows us to work with that because that's an external motivating factor that allows us to move forward. And then, you know, kind of on the other side of the paradigm of it's OK if we just sit here in the grief as well. Right. Because we're going to we're gonna we're going to be where you need us to be in this moment. And and. And again, kind of going back to more of the comparison to more directive practices where it's kind of like, well, here's the work you need to do if you're going to move forward, right? Where sometimes that doesn't allow people the space to sit in the feelings that they need to sit-in. And that can be just as important as to truly heal because, you know, kind I'll use myself as an example as a man, sometimes we like to just fix everything and. And not feel our feelings, and we try to move through processes too fast. And being allowed to just sit there is, again, that powerful tool that motivational interviewing allows us to bring to the table. So now I know you a little bit, and so I know your more than just MI. I know that you have lots of things in your sphere that you do. And so. Your background blends motivational interviewing, solution-focused work, your expressive arts, your trauma-informed care. And yet, MI is a foundation. Does it sit in front of these things? Does it sits alongside these things. Does it blend with these things, how do you bring total package that is TESA to the table in your practice and outside your practice as well?

Tessa Bechtold [00:21:35] All right, I think, yeah, MI is, it's not a clinical intervention or maybe even technique which might feel radical to say, but it's a way of being with people.

And so it's, it follows you outside of your office. It's how you interact with people, whether it be the cashier at the grocery store or having a conversation with a friend. Of course, still professional boundaries, but you know what I mean there. I mean, I will say there is a great deal of overlap, I feel between solution-focused therapy and MI. However, the MI spirit, again, is what sets it apart. It's that word compassion and empowerment just kind of differentiates it for me.

Todd Sage [00:22:27] Yeah, and I love that because, you know, your example of using it out in the community and stuff, you know, I use it with my friends and family. And it's kind of funny, because, my son knows motivational interviewing, and sometimes we're having a conversation about something he's like, Oh, we're going to do, am I? Okay, that's cool. Let's just do it, right? Because it is a good way to just have compassionate, in the moment conversations that You know, I care enough about you, regardless of how we're interacting right now, to show up in a good way, because I don't know what type of day you're having. I don't know kind of what's going on behind the scenes at your house, you know? But I still wanna show up as a loving, compassionate, caring person in my encounters. And you know, for somebody like me that's a little bit introverted, I find MI is my way of interacting with the world in an extroverted way. That allows me kind of a formula to do it right that I know like like I'm not going to be you know taken as odd or different because it's just it's a good way of being with people and people see it enjoy it I've never had somebody say that's odd why are you like that and so so it's it's great to hear that that I'm not the only one using it outside of of clinical practice. So another question I kind of came up with here that I want to kind of think about so When you're training and supervising other clinicians around motivational interviewing, what do you see is kind of the hardest part for people new to motivational interviewing to really internalize related to this practice?

Tessa Bechtold [00:24:05] Yeah, you know, even just continue to reflect on some of the things that you just shared. The two words that come to mind for me is intentional and authenticity. MI allows for a communication style that integrates those two. And so when I think about like training or supervising other clinicians, Sometimes it's hard for people to kind of have a why, whether it's a personal experience or a struggle or a loved one, their story that shaped them and staying connected to that why through every single volley in the conversation. I think it's also really important to just continually ask yourself, who is this for? Am I asking this question to satisfy my own curiosity? Or am I trying to persuade someone not to use substances because of my fear of what might happen? Of course, we all have fears and safety must always remain the utmost priority. And MI also asks us to prize a client's goals, honor their autonomy, support them with compassion and guide them through that spirit of MI rather than our own agenda.

Todd Sage [00:25:20] Absolutely, and one thing you kind of brought up to that that I know you've seen in the training we've done together, and probably in your own supervision and such, is sometimes for our supervisors or our folks that may be not working front lines with clients and patients and things, sometimes they'll come to an MI training and they'll say, why am I here? I don't work with clients. But as you just brought up, MI and the approaches that if I'm in my. Fits so well in supervision as well, right? I mean, really having that curiosity about like, you know, how do I support you best in your growth and learning as a clinician, as a child welfare worker, as this or that, and are you thinking about, you now, why this difficult client you're working with is maybe kind of stuck? What stage of change are they in, right, and so. You know, I always tell people that MI just isn't about the clinical side, it's just about really kind of processing all things in a meaningful way and having growth and development in all different kind of areas of an organization. So like you said, creating that sense of safety as a supervisor with your workers is just as important as

the worker making that same sense of safety with their clients. And that's truly how we get growth across organizations. And more importantly, start to change some of those organizational cultures. Because not everybody works in an MI center like yours where the organizational culture is already kind of baked in to hold these values up high. So. You know, as we're kind of coming to a close here and wrapping things up. So, you know, if a social worker or counselor listening to our conversation today wanted to bring more MI into their own everyday practice, you know with their clients, you now, whether they're doing case management or they're do informal therapy, are there a supervisor like we just talked about? Where would you tell them to start their journey with MI?

Tessa Bechtold [00:27:20] I would say start from a place of loving your clients as human beings and loving the work that you do, trying to remember your why in every interaction, every session and bringing it back to that.

Todd Sage [00:27:37] So again, it's like you started this conversation about that deliberate choice of, here's how I want to show up, and making that deliberate choices every day. And that's really the foundation of the journey. I would agree with you there. The other thing that I like to share with folks that are curious about MI is, you know, Miller and Rolnek are godfathers of MI. The MI book is such a easy read. And it's talking, it's not talking at you. It's really just a walk in alongside you as you read the book, just like we do our practice. And so, you know, there's nothing that says that you have to go get formal training and motivational interviewing to be good at motivational interviewing. Yes, obviously that helps. And there's people like you out there doing supervision and training people. There's people me out there doing that. But interestingly, at the last conference that you and I went to, Bill Miller stood up and really talked about how people can become great practitioners through self-learning, because it is about being willing to take the journey and being deliberate on how you decide to show up, and more importantly, being willing to make mistakes. I think sometimes as clinicians, we worry about that perfectionism, right? I have the degrees on the wall and I'm not supposed to make mistakes, but the human condition is so complex that if you're not willing to make mistake and grow and learn with alongside your clients, because our clients are our best teachers, they really are. And so that vulnerability, A, takes us back to the authenticity you were talking about earlier. Right? Clients will see if OK, they're willing to be authentic and vulnerable with me, so I want to be authentically vulnerable with them. And so that work that we do together in that space is much more powerful that way. So I would just add that to your kind of recommendation as well. So looking back at the whole journey, your training, your practice, you're building a center that's just over a year old now. What's kind of surprised you most about how you got to where you are today?

Tessa Bechtold [00:29:50] Or to paint just one thing. Honestly, I never imagined that I'd be where I'm at today. Truly, this was never a part of the plan. And whenever I share that, people always kind of give me the surprise look. It really was just kind of doing the next right thing that felt right. And so... For me, that's what surprised me is that we even exist, that we've even had this practice. And that's, you know, I'm just so honored and fortunate and shocked every day that there's so many talented and empathetic colleagues that want to be a part of this. I also want to celebrate MI and I'm really excited to see where this goes.

Todd Sage [00:30:37] I can only imagine in my own mind where it's going to go, because MI practitioners just seem to bind each other, right? I kind of tease like two social workers in the wild that don't know each other can kind of just look at each other and say, oh, that's a social worker. We have this formal community we call Mint. But even outside that formal

community, people that have decided that this is how I want to practice and this is I want be with my clients and my patients and whatever where I'm working, we just seem to find each other because it feels good to be around other people that have made this deliberate choice to be with their clients in this way. So with all that kind of said, one last question to kind of close this out today, what do you want our in-social work listeners to walk away? From our overall conversation today. What would be the one takeaway or the one aha or the sage advice you would give related to motivational interviewing, starting your own practice, being brave and bold and being willing to put yourself out there and do the things that you're doing.

Tessa Bechtold [00:31:48] I've waffled between two. One word that comes up in openness, saying yes to opportunities, experiences, whether that be you're in school and you're still trying to figure out what your niche is. Saying yes to whichever group that you can be a part of extracurricular activity and just going for it, asking questions. But that maybe goes into the word that resonates most. For me, it's like curiosity. And for me, curiosity is what ignited my spark initially with all of this, inspired me to ask questions, to stay open, to continue learning, to make mistakes. And I hope listeners walk away holding on to the idea that we all deserve a safe space. We all deserve really good listening too. If we can offer that to people, we're already making the world a better place.

Todd Sage [00:32:40] Absolutely. Well said. I really appreciate you taking the time to share your journey, to share knowledge and wisdom related to this. I'd love to hear from our audience if they want to know more about Motivational Reviewing in the future. I'm sure you and I could sit down and really dig deeper into the fundamentals of some of the things we talked about today regarding the spirit and the authenticity and all those things because it is so important to the work that we in creating healthy communities, healthy families, healthy individuals, that we have something like motivational interviewing and practitioners like you to guide us in finding our way through the muck of life because life is messy and we all need a guide or are as the MI book talks about a Sherpa to help guide us from time to time. And MI is a great way to get that guidance. So I appreciate your time today.

Tessa Bechtold [00:33:32] Thank you so much for having me and anyone would like to reach out, you know, to feel free that people can find me at Motivational Counseling located in Western New York, 1925 Kensington Avenue, Cheek Duwaga. And I encourage anyone who is curious about MI or interested in our community to reach out to me by email or by calling our office. I'm always happy to sit down, connect and have a conversation.

Todd Sage [00:33:55] Yes, absolutely. And contact information will be in the podcast note for our listeners too. That's that's one thing to know about. You know, in my practitioners, we love to share. Don't hesitate to reach out. Tessa or myself as well. If you have questions or things like that. We love to to share so appreciate you. That was Tessa of The Motivational Counseling. And as I think about the conversation that we just had, a few things I keep coming back to from our conversation. The first question she asked herself, who is this for? When you ask a client something, are you asking because it serves them or because it settles something in you? That is worth carrying into every session and honestly into supervision as well. The second question is, what she said about grief, that there's less guiding and more following. Motivational interviewing typically gets typecast as a substance use intervention. And it's easy to forget that meeting someone where they are sometimes means sitting still with them. And the last one is in line with what she closed with. We all deserve a safe space and we all deserve her really good listening to. Tess's contact information for the motivational counseling is in the show notes. And if you're

curious about motivational interviewing, reach out to her or reach out to me. As we said in the conversation, motivational interviewing folks love to share. For In Social Work, I'm Todd Sage. Thanks for listening.