



# Prelude

## Considering Change

Something in your life has become an issue for you.

- It might be a habit—one you want to eliminate or one you want to cultivate.
- It could be a situation—one you're thinking about getting out of or one you're wondering about getting into.
- It might be a pattern—how you relate to others or try to get what you want out of life.

Whatever the issue is, it's not going away (although you might be wishing it would!). Maybe that's because someone else wants you to change, although you're not sure you need to. Maybe *you* believe something has to be done but can't decide what. Perhaps you know what you should do, but making that change would mean giving up something else that really matters to you—or something you can't identify keeps holding you back. Or maybe, even though you know you *want* to make a particular change, you don't believe you *can* make that change or you can't see a way to make it happen.

Although the issue might be a new one, it wouldn't be surprising if you'd been dealing with this dilemma for years, wrestling with indecision and inaction. That's because, when it comes to important life issues, *it's normal to get stuck*. And the variety of habits, situations, and patterns that people can get stuck in is staggering:

- Drinking, doing drugs, smoking, gambling, shopping, or having sex so much or so recklessly that you hurt your health, your career, your finances, or the people you care about.
- Struggling to gain control over your diet or your weight.
- Knowing you should exercise more but never managing to do it (or giving up each time you get started).
- Staying in a relationship, job, or career that you think you should leave.
- Losing control of your emotions and acting destructively or suppressing your emotions and feeling lost, empty, or frustrated.
- Holding on to resentment that you wish you could let go of or struggling to decide whether to forgive someone who's hurt you.
- Procrastinating about taking care of any number of tasks, small and large, all the while knowing you need to get moving.

Regardless of the issue and how long you've been grappling with it, you most likely picked up this book to see if it can help you get unstuck. I believe that it can. This book is based on the framework, strategies, and spirit of *motivational interviewing*, a counseling approach with a track record of effectiveness at helping people resolve even long-standing dilemmas about change in a remarkably short time.

Don't be thrown by the name. Motivational interviewing (or "MI," as it's known for short) has nothing to do with journalism or job interviews, and it's not a "rah-rah" method of motivating people. MI helps people who are thinking about a change to access their own natural, internal motivation and capacity for positive action. When offered by a counselor or health-care provider, it's designed to be brief, and there's evidence from scientific studies that it can work in just a few sessions.<sup>1</sup> It can be the basis for a book

Getting stuck in difficult life decisions is normal. Motivational interviewing provides an effective way of helping you resolve your own dilemma.

as well because it works not primarily through the practitioner's knowledge or expertise but by recognizing and building on the fact that the most powerful force for change resides within you and that the key to helping you change is to help you find, strengthen, and act on it.

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<sup>1</sup>If you're interested in the science behind motivational interviewing, an appendix describing this research and the history of the approach can be found at the end of the book.

The specifics of how MI can help you are found in the chapters to come. But it's possible to crystallize its essence in this simple way: Motivational interviewing will help you *listen to yourself* instead of *talking at yourself* and *understand* what's keeping you stuck instead of *demanding* of yourself that you get unstuck. As you give yourself "a good listening-to," with care and respect and without judgment, you will find yourself tapping into the natural well of internal motivation and ability for positive change that is present in all of us.

You might say, as one of the founders of MI has suggested, that participating in a motivational interview is like having a midwife present during childbirth. The midwife doesn't give birth to the baby; it's the mom who does all the hard work. But having someone who knows the ins and outs of helping the mom draw on her own strength and desire to give birth to a healthy child, who can guide her through a difficult yet life-changing process, can make all the difference. And that's what this book is designed to be: a step-by-step guide to capitalizing on the motivation and capacity for change that lies dormant within you, waiting to be born.

Now, people come to books like this with a variety of outlooks—hopeful and open-minded, skeptical, or just desperate for anything that might help. You'll soon be in a position to decide whether your initial attitude was justified and whether this book offers what you came looking for.

But first, I want to tell you about the one thing you *won't* find in this book. How you feel about what's missing will help you decide right now whether this book is right for you.

## **THE LAST THING YOU NEED IS ONE MORE PERSON TELLING YOU WHAT TO DO**

This book will not tell you what to do about the issue in your life.

If you've been thinking about your issue long enough to pick up this book, then the chances are very good that at least one person has already been telling you what you should do and why. Whether the message came in the form of advice, persuasion, or a demand, the most important thing to notice is this: *here you are, still looking for help in getting unstuck*. People telling you what to do hasn't solved the problem. It may even have made the situation harder for you.

But isn't that strange? Granted, if someone seemed more interested in bossing you around than helping or was more critical than supportive, you probably didn't appreciate that at all. But if that person seemed to have

your best interests at heart and knows you well or has lots of experience in dealing with issues like yours, why didn't this approach work?

Let's take a closer look. A person who knows you're struggling with some area of your life offers you advice about what to do. It's possible that you know right away that the advice won't work for you: you've tried it already, or it just doesn't feel like a good fit. (We'll come back to the key idea of "fit" in Part III of the book.) What do you do? You might say as much or you might smile politely, say "Thanks," and change the subject. Moreover, if the advice was really obvious—

- "Have you tried cutting out sweets?"
- "Maybe you should talk to your partner about it."
- "Remind yourself that you'll feel so much better once your work is out of the way."
- "What if you just limit yourself to drinking on social occasions and not by yourself?"

—your smile might be a bit forced as you wonder whether the person giving you the advice could really think you're so dense that you wouldn't have thought of that by now!

If the advice was not so obvious, and you haven't tried it before, you might just think, "Yeah, that's what I should do." And yet it doesn't really happen: maybe you try it a little bit and then give up; maybe time goes by and you forget or stop thinking about it until it gets brought up again, and you think, "Yeah, I should do that." From there, whether you just forget about it again, or start to feel bad about not taking the advice, the outcome is the same: nothing much changes.

Nothing, that is, except what happens the next time you see that person. If you think the subject will come up again, you might be tempted to avoid him or her. You don't really want to hear the same advice or hurt a well-meaning person's feelings by rejecting it.

And, of course, the person might do more than just ask how it's going or repeat the advice; he or she might start trying to *convince* you to follow it:

- "Don't you realize how good it would be for you to start exercising? You'd have so much more energy, you'd look better, and it's so good for your health!"
- "You really need to forgive your ex. It's just eating away at you, I can tell, and the only one it hurts is you."

- “You should start looking for a new job. Your boss doesn’t appreciate you, and you’re such a hard worker! I bet if you looked around, you’d find *ten* positions that are better than the one you have. Why don’t you start sending around your resume and checking out the online job search sites?”

When you imagine someone saying something like this to you, can you start to feel the effect it has? The chances are pretty small that your reaction would be to think, “Of course! Why didn’t I think of that? That’s what I’ll do!”

Instead, you might engage in *pseudoagreement*: “Oh, right, what a good idea, I’ll do that,” you’d say, smiling and nodding until you can change the subject or end the conversation. I call this the “bobblehead effect,” and it’s what people do every day when they visit their dentist and the hygienist asks how often they floss—they lie! Or, to put it more gently, they say what the hygienist wants to hear, fudge just a little, and smile and nod while the hygienist goes over the proper flossing technique yet again. This tactic is designed to avoid the lecture, minimize the embarrassment or guilt they’re feeling about not flossing, or prevent the hygienist from thinking of them as “bad” or labelling them “noncompliant.”

On the other hand, you might respond instead with a classic “yes, but . . .” statement:

- “I know it would be good for me to start exercising . . . but it’s so hard to get started, and I have so little time.”
- “I *should* forgive him, I really should; it would be so much better for me to just let go. . . . It’s just that I can’t get over how awful he acted. I just can’t understand how he could have treated me that way.”
- “You’re right, I definitely deserve to be treated better at work—they’d be lost without me. . . . Still, things are really tough right now, and a lot of really good people are out there looking for positions—the competition would be so fierce.”

These responses, you’ll notice, leave you no closer to following the advice or making a change than you were when you started. In fact, instead of feeling more ready, willing, and able to take the steps being suggested, you’re likely to feel even less so.

This is even more true when offers of advice or efforts at persuasion go one step further and turn into outright pressure. If you’ve ever been threatened with dire consequences if you don’t do what someone says—

- “Either you quit drinking or I’m out of here!”
- “If you don’t get your blood pressure under control right away, you’re going to damage your kidneys and put yourself at serious risk of heart failure.”

—or been the target of an effort to shame you—

- “How can you stay with him? Don’t you have any self-respect?!”

—or make you feel so guilty that you’ll be forced to change—

- “If you loved me, you’d take better care of your body instead of letting yourself go.”
- “You’re so selfish, spending all that money on clothes and other stuff you don’t need, instead of saving it for things that are really important.”

—then you know the effect of these kinds of tactics. Part of you might feel as though you must do what that person says, and you might even start thinking about how you’re going to do it—and yet, at the exact same time, another part of you is having a very different reaction:

- Defiant: “You can threaten me all you want, but you can’t make me!”
- Minimizing: “I know lots of people who do this much more than I do, and no one tries to tell *them* they have to stop.”
- Anxious or panicky: “What am I going to do? I’ve got to do something! But what?!”
- Helpless and overwhelmed: “I know I have to stop . . . but I don’t know how . . . this is awful.”
- Consumed with guilt, shame, or self-loathing: “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I act like a normal person?”

Unsolicited advice, rational persuasion, threats, or confrontation are all toxic to anyone who is stuck, trying fruitlessly to make or act on a decision. Unwanted efforts to direct your decisions or actions, no matter how well intended, only divert your energy and focus from wrestling with the problem to wrestling with the source of the pressure. They steer you toward avoiding, pretending, denying, or giving up. They leave you feeling

deflated, demoralized, and generally worse about yourself than you already did.

And this brings us back to the reason for the statement I made at the beginning of this section: *This book will not tell you what to do about the issue in your life.*

Imagine that I'd begun by writing: *Stop hesitating and get started on changing your life! No more excuses; I know you can do it; it's time for you to get moving, and I'm going to show you how.* How would you have reacted? It's possible that in the moment you'd have felt relieved or even excited: "Yes! I'm going to do it now!" But it wouldn't have lasted; you'd have started to lose momentum; doubts would have crept in: "Do I really want to do this? Can I really carry it through? Is this really the right time?" And if you didn't feel this initial rush of enthusiasm, your reaction would almost certainly have been just like those I've been describing: superficial agreement plus minimizations or mental *yes buts*, indignation, guilt, shame, or helplessness at being unable to do what I was telling you to do.

## HOW CAN THIS BOOK HELP?

The starting point for this book, and for MI as an approach to helping people with decisions about change, is this core insight: *There are good reasons you haven't yet decided about or made the change you've been considering.* When people are torn between competing wants and needs or visions of the future, they are in the state known as *ambivalence*. And ambivalence is seldom resolved through advice, persuasion, exhortation, confrontation, or coercion; all of those things tend to mire people even more deeply. So the way to free yourself to move forward is first to become interested in and accept the part of you that *doesn't* want to change—and to realize that this is a perfectly normal place to start the process.

The power of MI lies, in part, in its method for helping you reduce the pressure that has been building ever since you found yourself faced with a choice that you didn't feel ready, willing, or able to make. That pressure can come from outside, from others who become insistent or critical or impatient—but it also can, and often does, come from inside. In fact, as you'll see later, it's often because people have begun to put pressure *on themselves* that they react so strongly against the advice, persuasion, and direction of others.

Whether the pressure comes from inside, outside, or both, the more you feel pushed to "just do it," the more likely you are to struggle and feel trapped in a morass of indecision or to avoid dealing with the situation

altogether. The good news is that the opposite is also true: once that pressure, both internal and external, is taken off, MI can guide you to find your own answers to the questions of what to do and how to do it.

## THE WAY FORWARD

This book puts the power of motivational interviewing in your hands and offers concrete, practical steps for making and successfully carrying out whatever decision ultimately feels right for you. I'll begin by helping you understand why people get stuck when faced with difficult decisions about change and identify what's keeping *you* stuck. After introducing the critical dimensions of *importance* and *confidence* for change, I'll help you reduce the pressure you've been feeling and recognize and appreciate the positive qualities and strengths you already possess that can help you resolve your struggle. We'll explore your dilemma, tap into your most important values to turn them into the engines of positive change, and help you build confidence for tackling the challenges that lie ahead. When the time is right, I'll guide you in developing a personal plan for change that includes only the steps and strategies that feel right for you and then carrying out and sustaining the change you've undertaken.

Just as important as the content of this book (the "what") is the process I'll engage you in as you work your way through its chapters (the "how"). I'll invite you to write about your thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the issue you're dealing with. To provide an easy way to keep your responses organized I've created online forms, with the same headings you'll find in this book, that are available for free at

(Of course, writing in a notebook or journal can work just as well if you prefer.)

As you answer questions that help you think in a fresh way about your dilemma, I'll often ask you to return to your answers and think (and write) more about them. This is what I meant by "giving yourself a good listening-to": a good listener does not just listen to the first thing you say, but keeps listening, inviting you to think further and deeper and discover things about yourself and your situation that you didn't realize before. (In fact, for reasons I'll explain later, I will at times quite literally ask you to "listen to yourself" as you read your responses out loud in order to help you think about them afresh.) Your understanding of your dilemma will change and grow as a result. This is how I'll help you find your own answers instead of giving you mine.

At every step along the way, what happens in this book will be guided by what the developers of MI, Drs. William R. ("Bill") Miller and Stephen



(“Steve”) Rollnick, have called the “spirit” of motivational interviewing. This spirit has four components:

1. *Acceptance*, which includes an abiding respect for the *autonomy* (*auto*, self; *nomos*, law: “to govern oneself”) and affirmation of the worth of each person who is faced with a decision about change, as well as a desire to understand that person deeply and without judgment.
2. A commitment to *partnership*, the joining of the aspirations of the person facing the decision and the person who seeks to help that person achieve what he or she aspires to.
3. The belief that the most effective way of helping people succeed in making and carrying out their decisions is through *evocation*, or drawing out their own wishes, values, goals, strengths, and abilities, rather than attempts at installing “correct” ideas or expert information.
4. A strong sense of *compassion* for every person who struggles to make important life decisions without ever being certain that they are the right ones and to carry out those decisions in the face of obstacles and challenges that can easily derail change.

Wherever you are in dealing with the dilemma you’re stuck in, that is the place where you will start. Because there is no single pathway through ambivalence, at times the activities you complete, and the order in which you complete them, will vary depending on what you need as you progress.

Similarly, there’s no one “correct” pace at which to work with this book. Completing the activities in a particular section of a chapter together and finishing each chapter within a relatively short time can prevent you from losing your place. It’s quite possible to complete all of Parts I and II within days or weeks, although Part III may take longer, depending (as you will see) on the kind of change you choose to make. What’s most important, though, is to find the pace that feels right for you—not rushed or pressured, which would make it hard to remain thoughtful, but also not so slow or intermittent that you lose focus. Returning regularly to the activities in the book will give you the best chance of building momentum toward resolution of your dilemma.

Guided by the spirit of MI, and shaped by its research-proven methods, the book you are holding can be a source of support and a companion in your process of resolving your struggle with change. If you’ve decided this approach is right for you, let’s get started.