

# Tips for Language Interpreters in Motivational Interviewing Sessions



**Understanding Your Role:** Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a way of communicating that helps people find the motivation to make positive behavior changes.

Since MI depends on empathy and quick engagement, interpreters play an important role in not only translating words but showing the client's emotion and intention.

The following guide will help you improve communication and support caseworkers in building trust and positive relationships with their clients.



## Active Listening and Observing

- Pay attention to nonverbal signs such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language.
- Reflect these in your interpretation to show the emotional tone of the speaker.



## Mirror Emotional Tone

- If the caseworker's voice is calm and soothing, match that tone when interpreting.
- If the client expresses frustration or sadness, mirror their tone appropriately without exaggerating or concealing.



## Use Empathic Language

- Use words that demonstrate accurate empathy during the conversation. Sympathy is how others feel about the situation; empathy represents how the individual themselves feels about the situation.
  - **For example:** If the individual is clearly struggling, "This whole situation has really been difficult for you." You want the words to match the mental and emotional state of the individual and expressed in a culturally appropriate way.
- Maintain the balance between reflecting empathy and accurately translating. You are not putting words in their mouth or making assumptions.



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### Maintain Neutrality

- Avoid adding personal opinions or advice.
- Stay true to the caseworker's choice of words while accurately showing their emotion.



### Ask for Clarification

- If a statement is unclear, ask the caseworker for clarification to make sure you interpret the true meaning.
- Repeat back complex emotions or concerns to make sure you're correct.



### Manage Pauses and Silence

- Silence can be powerful in motivational interviewing. Avoid filling pauses with extra words unless told to do so by the caseworker.
- Make room for intentional pauses to allow space for client reflection.



### Cultural Sensitivity

- Be aware of cultural differences that may affect how emotions are expressed.
- Adapt your tone and wording to align with cultural norms while maintaining accuracy.



### Self-Care and Boundaries

- Supporting emotional conversations can be hard. Take breaks if needed and reach out to a supervisor if you're feeling overwhelmed.
- Maintain appropriate emotional distance while demonstrating empathy.

## QUESTIONS?

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