

Talking to Change: An MI Podcast

Glenn Hinds and Sebastian Kaplan



Episode 39: MI with People Who Are Homeless, with Danny Lang, MSW

Glenn Hinds:

Hello, everybody, and welcome to Talking to Change: a Motivational Interviewing podcast. My name is Glenn Hinds. I'm based Derry, in Northern Ireland, and as always, I'm joined by my good friend, Sebastian Kaplan in Winston-Salem. Hi, Seb.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Hey, Glenn. Good to see you today.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah, and you, too. We're really looking forward to talking to our guest today, Danny, exploring Motivational Interviewing and homelessness. But before we move straight into the conversation, can you just remind people how they can contact us on social media, and keep in touch with us?

Sebastian Kaplan:

Absolutely. We have a few ways to reach us and to interact with us. Facebook page is Talking To Change. Twitter is @ChangeTalking. On Instagram, we have Talking To Change Podcast, and our email address with any suggestions and questions that you might have is podcast@glennhinds.com. And of course, we welcome people's feedback, and if you feel up to it, you can rate and review us. We certainly appreciate that.

Glenn Hinds:

Thank you. So, on with the show. Today we are joined by our good friend and colleague, Danny Lang. Hey, Danny.

Danny Lang:

Hey, how are you doing, Glenn? Thanks, Sebastian. Thanks for having me.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Thanks for joining us, Danny.

Glenn Hinds:

Yeah, thanks for coming along. So, we always start the show with the question, tell us a bit about yourself and your journey into Motivational Interviewing. So, how did you find MI, and how did you get to where you're at?

Danny Lang:



First of all, my role presently is group and individual counseling with individuals that have a serious mental illness and substance misuse disorder, as well as need to be homeless or at risk of homelessness, and that includes people who are really marginally housed, so it could be in rooming houses or really dodgy, unsafe housing. I've been doing that for a number of years now, I think, almost 20 years in that role. However, the beginnings of my origins in working in homelessness was really in street outreach, and working in drop-ins.

Danny Lang:

And so, I can remember a lot of times being on the street, sitting beside somebody, and having these grand conversations, and they were good, just they didn't always go somewhere, right? There was not a lot of focus to them. And so, while there was some ... the engagement was good, but there wasn't always a conversation about change. And it was week-to-week. We'd go back and see somebody, and while the support was there, it wasn't necessarily, when I look retrospectively, there were so many opportunities where these conversations, they could have maybe elicited a little more change, or elicited more opportunities for people to look at their lives in different ways.

Danny Lang:

So, it was when I took MI that I was just, it was this whole reflective process in my first day of MI training, where I was like, man. And not in a shameful way, but it's just like, wow, those were just missed opportunities, and lots of missed opportunities. And so, it was kind of a mild wake up call, to okay, there's a whole different way of doing business, and I have this approach, but I also need some other tools in my back pocket to have these conversations with these individuals, to support them in a better way.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Sound like you recognized the value in the conversations that you had, that you were willing to talk with people in really difficult circumstances, and I imagine could recognize some value that those conversations had, and once you learned about MI, it really opened your eyes to the possibility of how those conversations could be more effective, maybe just more helpful from a change process standpoint.

Danny Lang:

Yeah, it was like, it was learning the difference between sustained talk and change talk. So, I was great at sitting and reflecting, being with that sustained talk, but at the end of the day, that person's still left with everything that's still stuck in their life, and was it helpful? Sure. I had good rapport with these individuals. However, could it have been different, or could it have been these different conversations that I would have liked to have had? Retrospectively, I think that's where for me, it was this, okay, if I'm going to continue in this career of where I am going to go, and if this is going to be the population that I enjoy and want to work with, okay, how am I going to do it in a way then that is going to, when I sit down with somebody, I'm going to bring me, but I'm also going to use some different strategies and tools to encourage this conversation to go in another way, and maybe a way that this individual hasn't talked to somebody before.



Glenn Hinds:

It arose, that opportunity. You saw a pathway open for yourself, and that Motivational Interviewing offered you. And I suppose, what was it that you discovered in MI that added to what it was you were already doing, that did you find value in?

Danny Lang:

There's a number of things I think I've kind of grown with over the years. One thing was definitely the language of change. Somebody's sitting on the street, and they may be struggling, and they may have whatever substance, a bottle of vodka, whatever. They maybe look like they're struggling or they're hurting. However, there's still change talk there. Amongst everything, when you're sitting with an individual, and you're just accepting them as that human being, so there's kind of that spirit of MI, that acceptance piece, the honoring autonomy, knowing that there's a partnership. Sitting with somebody and just being with that individual, where they're at in that moment, without me trying to change it, without me trying to judge it, that it should be this way or that way, those lessons in MI were just expanded. And then, just listening for the language of change amongst the dialogue that we were having naturally. I just started to tune my ear into what was another way, where we could else go in these conversations, which was really helpful.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, I sometimes think of it as like a filter, I guess. It's like, there's certain things that get sort of, I guess, trapped in the filter, I suppose, and those, the kind of language of change piece that you were describing there, Danny, the things that just are more actionable, I guess, on a practitioner's end, or something that stands out in a way that just wasn't that apparent, or didn't seem as useful conversationally, before really learning about and understanding how the language of change works, and how you can respond to it in a way that makes for a more helpful conversation.

Danny Lang:

Yeah, definitely. I always imagine that every time I sit with an individual, the dance is always different. And so, it's for me and that individual I sit with to figure out the dance. And so, before MI, I think the dances were a little bit of a wrestle first, and I was trying to do the salsa, and that person was doing the waltz, and they never really were close enough to make a good match.

Danny Lang:

But as I developed my MI skills over the years, I find that we're able to figure out the dance in a partnership. The dance comes to each other more quicker than before. And I think that's what allows the conversation then, for me to have these conversations with individuals about how life could just slightly be different in that moment. And now we're talking that their mental health is taken care of. Just small, incremental things. It could be just shoes. It could be food. It could be, just what is it that could make their day slightly different?

Glenn Hinds:

And you used the familiar metaphor of the dance, and we've talked a few times on the podcast about the difference between the experience of wrestling with our clients and dancing with our clients. And it sounds like even when there were times when you were, in the past, when you were offering the dance, it was almost like there was a sense of almost a predetermined, this is the dance that we're going to do, and very often, clients turned up and danced in a slightly different format.

Glenn Hinds:

It sounds like one of the things you learned from Motivational Interviewing was to negotiate which dance that's going to be done, that your purpose is to dance. What dance is performed with your client is the conversation that you have with them, and that you enjoy dancing. And what has changed is just that flexibility. You've brought a flexibility to your willingness to dance whatever form they're willing to do, because that's what you're keen to do.

Glenn Hinds:

You create a relationship to build on the rapport that you already have that you already mentioned that you were being helpful. You were offering people company. You were offering people connection, but what MI has offered is that alongside of that, there is some opportunity to go in particular directions that will bring about positive change in their lives. Whether it's about recognizing what this person needs from me today is a pair of shoes, or they need a referral to another agency, or they need me to take them somewhere. That comes in the conversation. That is the dance, and the deep, more incremental changes are themselves all, "successes" that lead to the other person's wellbeing being improved, which is ultimately what your goal was.

Danny Lang:

Yeah. That's said really beautifully. Thank you.

Glenn Hinds:

I love it. There's a subtlety to what was changed, and what you were doing. It sounds like Motivational Interviewing has brought a little difference in the nuance of how you were. And I'm just wondering, you mentioned about the change talk. What else was it that helped you make that adaptation? What was it about learning Motivational Interviewing that you saw, with time and with your own practice? What was it? You mentioned the spirit. What else were you seeing, or how was the spirit manifesting? I suppose what I'm trying to do is just explore with you to help the audience understand, what was it that changed for Danny Lang when he was introduced to Motivational Interviewing that made him want to keep doing it?

Danny Lang:

I'll try to explain this the best that I can. If you imagine three circles, focusing, evoking, and planning, those processes of MI, I see those kind of interlinked, but surrounding those is engaging. So, I'm always engaging with somebody, and I just move in and out of focus and evoking and planning all the time. But outside of that, outside of the whole bubble, is



the spirit of MI. And for me, that is my container. That's my philosophy. That's my approach. That's how I see that individual sitting there. That's my container.

Danny Lang:

So, one, it teaches me, there's an individual in front of me that says they know, too. That MI says, that's a person there. They have wisdom. They have experience. They know what's best for them in their life. Okay, so I need to do a partnership. Okay. So, that takes about 50% of my weight off, because I only have to do 50%. And then it says, hey, you've got to look at this person with compassion. And it's like, okay, all right. So, all I've got to do is sit there and understand that this person has some experiences that could be really helpful in their life, and I've got to help bring it apart. So, I'm going to have some compassion for their wisdom and what they've walked through, knowing that they know best for themselves.

Danny Lang:

Then there's this thing that says acceptance. Oh, man, so all I've got to do is look at this person and just accept them as a human being? That's all I've got to do? Oh, this is even better. So then, it allows me to know that I don't want to watch somebody die on the streets. I don't want to watch them inject and have fentanyl overdoses. I don't want to watch that. But those are behaviors that I can let go, because I can accept that there's a human being in front of me that ultimately needs unconditional acceptance and love from somebody sitting there, and just to sit with their story, and hold that story in a way that then can be evocative, which then brings in that last piece of spirit.

Danny Lang:

That, I always see as the container for which keeps me from not stepping on people's toes in the dance too much. I mean, of course I'm going to do it, but that's my container to pull me back. And so that I don't have compassion fatigue, as a helping professional. We all witness and hear so many stories, but that's the thing that allows me to hear the stories, see the things that I see on a daily basis, and not then get deflated and hopeless and fall apart as a helping professional. And that's where I think MI is so strong and powerful, because it can work with these marginalized populations, and allow people then to come back to life who have skills, who have abilities, who have things in their lives, and it's just, we're the guide that, I'm sure those are the terms you use, for lack of a better word, at the moment. So, that's what I think about it.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Wow, Danny. Thank you for that wonderfully rich, energetic, impassioned description. I think you just summarized our entire podcast series in like, two minutes. So, that is just really wonderful. Great visuals in there, and you brought up so many of the important MI components, whether it was the four processes, the spirit. And one thing that I, myself, I don't do work with the homeless in the way that you are describing, and we'll continue to learn from you with, but I imagine there must be a strong pull when you are with someone whose needs are so, I guess, basic and fundamental, right? I mean, you're talking about



needing shoes, right? Or people might have picked up on your accent, but you're from Toronto, Canada, right?

Danny Lang:

Yeah, Ottawa. Ottawa, Canada.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Ottawa, sorry. That was probably a big faux pas there, but I'm not aware of that.

Danny Lang:

It's all good.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Okay. But I bring that up, because people are really cold where you are, when they're outside for extended periods of time. So, we're talking about really fundamental needs, and I imagine there's this pull, or a risk, perhaps, when you as a professional are working with someone in that way, to just rush in with all the answers, and here, let me give you this, let me give you that. And I imagine MI, in some way, has allowed you to just slow the, what we call in MI righting reflex, right? To really slow that process down, and to make sure that you're aware that this is another person, and yes, their circumstances are such that you're having this conversation with them, but they have wisdom about their life and what their needs are, and they have opinions and autonomy and things like that. I don't know, I wonder if that's an accurate statement about the sort of risk, or that pull that you might have, and if so, how might you have worked through that yourself?

Danny Lang:

It's something that I have to be mindful every day. I know these are terms that we use loosely now, mindfulness, but this is something I am actively breathing in and breathing out, and being aware of when I step into it. Just last week, I was visiting an individual in his place, and he uses a lot of fentanyl, quite high risk for overdose, and I have to take a breath and take a step back, and recognize, this guy knows what more about overdose prevention than me. So, humble, like I'm humbling myself, because I'm going, that's not what he needs right now. He needs me initially to have the conversation.

Danny Lang:

Because I think sometimes the forgetfulness is, he may not want to see me that day. Even though he likes Danny, it doesn't mean he wants to see me that day. And that's the reality of it. So, I go in there to see him. That's why I always see the engaging as surrounded by the all. I move in, "Hey, dude. How's things going? What's been happening? I'm here to have a little conversation with you if you're willing, and I would love to hear what's going on in your life right now." And see what happens, and then listen and wait, without trying to force myself. But it is, it's breathing, and pulling back, and being aware of it, because ultimately, I'm trying to be as simple as I can in my job, and not make it as complicated as I can.



Danny Lang:

And lastly, what I would want to say about that, and I think it's really important, is when people have had so many run-ins with the "system," quote, you know, police, hospital, criminal justice, X, Y, Z, that have not always gone really helpful, if I come in as a help professional and I'm leading the cavalry, it just brings up people's mistrust of the system, and that's another roadblock and obstacle I've got to work around. So, if I can go in there more neutral, and be willing to have these conversations without the righting reflex, my feeling is then, they're more willing to trust themselves to have the conversation with me.

Danny Lang:

And that's what I always encourage people. Don't trust me. You probably shouldn't, because you've been betrayed by the system many, many, many times, and forgive the word, betrayal, but that's how people sometimes experience it. So, if you can trust yourself enough to talk to me for five minutes, we're golden. That's the things I think about, that keep me from pulling back in my righting reflex. That's what I keep telling myself.

Glenn Hinds:

What it sounds like is that the thing that you are practicing when you are working with people is, if we stay with the metaphor of the dance, you're practicing your steps in the dance, and as you were describing it, it sounds like the things that you're being conscious of is being mindful, believing in the other, being willing to ask if they want to dance with you today, and being curious, keeping that open mind, and being open to where that other person is, and exploring with them what it is they might need in the time that they have with you. And very significantly, recognizing their history and experience in the context of the conversation you're about to have, and to see where that goes, and to use then your skills, your open-ended questions, your affirmations, your reflections, in some ways to navigate in that space.

Glenn Hinds:

But the effort that you're making is all of that stuff about where within yourself, and who with, and believing in the other. And I guess, for many people, that will be interesting for them to consider the effort that that takes for us as practitioners to pay attention to ourselves, and to recognize our role: It's not to give answers. It's not to fix. It's to, as you described, take that step back, and be mindful and curious and understanding.

Glenn Hinds:

And as you were learning to do that, the fact that you kept doing it, you began to see a change in conversations with your service users, and I'm wondering what evidence you were seeing from your clients that was suggesting, this is working, this is why I'm going to keep doing it this way.

Danny Lang:

I think one is just direct feedback. "Thank you, Danny. That was really helpful." Two, they open the door, or they're willing to talk with me. COVID's made things a little bit more difficult, so engaging people is a little bit harder, you know what I mean? In terms of, I



have to go to find people. But yeah, do they open the door? Are they willing to talk to me? These things are one definite sign.

Danny Lang:

How the conversation goes. Does the conversation have that dance? Does it have a nice rhythm between the two of us, and when I step on their toes, or they step on mine, how do we recover? And at the end, when I do always ask, like, "Given what we just talked about for the last 10 minutes, what do you think you're going to do next, or how do you think it went, and how do you think this went today between us? Is there anything I could do different, or if I stepped on your toes, please let me know." I'm trying to be as transparent and clear as I can as well.

Danny Lang:

And so, people generally, once they get used to you, and they know you can handle the feedback ... Because sometimes they're afraid. I've noticed clients are afraid sometimes to give us the feedback, because they're worried that I'm going to close them, or shut their file, or shame them, or blame them. And so, I'm trying to at least have that relationship where I can get clear feedback from somebody, and they'll everything me know when I'm out of line, and I appreciate that. And then, I've just got to change my behavior.

Danny Lang:

But I think those are things that I'm looking for constantly, Glenn, is how does it feel? How's the dance? What's the conversation looking like? How are we going together? And yeah, what's their feedback to me?

Sebastian Kaplan:

So, there's some kind of, I guess, objective indicators. Do they run away when you approach them? Do they open the door? Do they come into your space, if they're coming to see you somewhere? So, I guess there's some of those things. There's overt expressions of appreciation and thanks and gratitude. You might have your own sense of how the rhythm of the dance is going.

Sebastian Kaplan:

But then, you bring up this point, this, I don't know if it's a strategy. It doesn't sound like you're doing it quite in such a formal way, but in some ways it is a strategy, of asking the other person for feedback. Again, I come back to the people that you're working with. I mean, how often are they asked, "Is what I'm doing helpful to you?" Right? I imagine, I work a lot with teenagers, and I try to ask them whenever I can, when it feels right. And I imagine, how many adults ask teenagers, "What could I do better to help you?" And just the question, of course, embedded within just the entire conversation, the entire relationship. I mean, those questions, in and of themselves, you might learn something helpful, like could you do less of this, or more of that, and that's great. But something about just asking the question, I imagine would be really helpful in and of itself, in terms of the implicit messages that it's sending, right?



Danny Lang:

Yeah, and I think MI teaches us so nicely, if we're really striving to have a partnership with somebody, then we are really trying to acknowledge and honor their side of the story too, and when people have had such experiences with the mental health system, where I spend a lot of time, and substance misuse field, I don't know sometimes when I make mistakes. I just don't know. It's not my fault. I just need to acknowledge it and move on. That's how I think about it, right? We don't need to dwell on it. If I step on your toes, I'm going to apologize and make amends, but I'm not going to dwell on it. And I want to help people do that as well, within their relationships, because sometimes some of the guys I work with, they get stuck in those resentments and anger, and holding those things, and the relationships fall apart. So, I can be that model as well. So, if they give me critical feedback, even if I don't like it, and whether I don't agree, I can hear it and listen to it.

Danny Lang:

I was pondering this the other day, and I was talking to my son about it, because he's an avid skateboarder, and he's always skating the streets, so they often run into some of the guys on the streets. Sometimes the guys, they'll just talk to them as they're skateboarding. And we were talking about, even sometimes when somebody's not well, and they may be talking to themselves, or whether my son sometimes, is he talking to me or is he talking to himself? I don't know. But there's always kernels of truth within what they're saying, so if I can just be with that individual, or listen to it, or even if I don't agree with all of that, with their feedback, there may be a kernel of truth in there that I've got to then self-reflect upon to change my practice, so that I can be a little bit more diligent. Because in a partnership, it asks you to show 50 and me to show 50. And so, my 50 then requires me to at least adapt to the dance.

Danny Lang:

And I think that's what makes it really difficult. You asked me sometimes the challenges. That could be a challenge, is that the dance looks really different depending on what people are struggling. So, if they're struggling from, or they're coming off different drugs, or on speed, or meth, or fentanyl, or they're active with psychosis, or just active with depression or anxiety, things can look really difficult. So, the dance could change five times within a 10-minute conversation. And that makes a challenge. However, I think being just open, and really willing to be with that individual, I think that's priceless for me.

Glenn Hinds:

And I'm struck by how humble what you describe ... how you describe how humble you are in what it is you're doing, because while the topic has been homelessness, it sounds like homelessness is a presentation that, from what you're saying, is surrounded by so many other things that these individuals are experiencing. The circumstances that they have, the coexistence of, perhaps, drugs and alcohol, and potentially mental ill health as well, that it's almost like the homelessness is just the presentation. Behind it are the issues that you're then experiencing in your relationships with these individuals.

Glenn Hinds:

And it sounds like what you're doing is, again, going back to what you were describing, is you're turning up to meet this unique individual who has multiple presentations potentially during the conversation, and just how clued in and switched on you have to be to be helpful to those people. And yeah, just, again, the effort that that must take for you, Dan. And I'm just wondering, how do you look after yourself doing all of that work?

Danny Lang:

It's funny, because I was just in this presentation this week, and forgive me, the lady's, the presenter's name is skipping me at this moment. But her message was, for us in this field, mental health professionals, it's so imperative to be looking after ourselves. To be saying no to extras. We're kind of knowing our limits. And her philosophy behind it, and I've been really thinking about this, this is why it's on my mind, so thank you for asking that. When all this stuff happens, we're the ones that continue to follow people and support them thereafter. So, if an event happens, a trauma or whatever, there may be people that go to the initial event, or the initial trauma, but it's often us healthcare providers that continue the support thereafter, as this term is, what she coined, last responders.

Danny Lang:

So, I really think about this as, oh my gosh, I really do get to look after myself in a better way. And the last 10 months of COVID's been heavy on helpers in general, and I know I want to be able to quote her name, and I'm sorry I don't have it on me. But it was just a really, one that sat with me, to think, my gosh, I need to be healthy and well, not only for my family, for my friends, but also for the population I'm serving. Can I get back to my mindfulness practice in the morning? Can I go back to going for my walks, and just connecting with nature? Can I give myself permission to say no to picking up a new individual? Can I say no to extra committee work, or to things that are being asked of me, because I don't know in your parts of the world, but it seems lately where we have "so much time," where we get offered all these things to do because it's like we have more time to do things, but really, I'm as busy as I ever have been.

Danny Lang:

And so, how do I then allow myself also to say no? And I think that's a gift that we have to teach ourselves, and I'm not going to say I have that down pat. I'll just say it's one that I'm working on every day. What are my limits? And making sure I have the priorities of the people I am serving right now, but also my family, and there are other roles I have in my life that are important as well.

Sebastian Kaplan:

To me, it brought up the analogy of, back when we used to fly in airplanes, the whole message of, if you're with a child and the masks come down, you put your own mask on first before you put your child's mask on, and it kind of counters the reflex of taking care of your child over you. And here, it's an example, not necessarily with your children, but with your clientele and your profession. And maybe tapping in a bit, into your value of being a helper, and being as helpful as you can be to the people that you work with, that



part of doing your work well is to take care of yourself, much like you would in that situation on the airplane.

Sebastian Kaplan:

You mentioned something a little while back about the shifts that you make in conversation, and how the dances can be so different. No two people are the same, but it sounds like the variety, I suppose, of conversation that you have might be really quite significant. And if you could maybe get into some detail, maybe, about what is it that you're listening for, or maybe an example. Maybe this guy that you brought up recently, or maybe somebody else, where you were in conversation, and then you realized, well, this isn't going the way the last time went, or the way I thought this was going to go. What were you responding to? How did you do it? And if you could even do some, here's what I was thinking, if that makes sense. You were talking about that sort of mindfulness practice in the moment, right? So, I'm just throwing a lot of things out there at you, but just wondering about a few more examples, or some kind of detail about how you make those shifts in conversation as you're responding to something that's pretty challenging, and maybe surprising.

Danny Lang:

Before I go in with somebody, obviously, this has been in the last, probably, year, I am really, and I'm going to tell you this right now, one of the blessings for me of COVID is I've gotten to take my practice out into the community again. So, while sometimes people used to come to me, or I was doing groups face to face, I'm obviously the virtual now, but right now, I can do some virtual therapy stuff, but I've kind of taken, it's almost like walk and talks I call them, right? It's actually been quite exciting to get right out and doing the actual, really, what I would call, maybe not everybody agrees, but doing really good psychotherapy work with people right in their community, right in their place, or within the environment that is where they're at. So, I think that has been quite fun.

Danny Lang:

So, I'm always thinking, as I'm going into it, I'm trying to set the pace, take a couple minutes, a minute just to breathe. Where was that individual? Kind of play it back in my head, where were we last time? And then just go in just kind of grounded and as open as I can. My mantra, and I didn't kind of let you guys know this, it's just kind of how I view it. When I approach somebody, I recognize, because of the complexities, and Glenn hit this, because of the complexities of the individuals when they're struggling with homelessness, or mental illness, or substance use, trauma, poverty, will I eat, physical health, emotional health, spiritual health. There's so many complexities.

Danny Lang:

I often think about it, and not in black in white, but I'm dealing with life and death every time in my interventions. And so, I know I'm going to be in the gray somewhere, but I really value it, and it keeps me humble, so that when I go in there, I'm just thinking, this is one intervention. Just today. I've got one hour with this individual. I've got one hour. I'm



going to be the best that I can, and after that, it's out of my hands, because I don't what the heck's going to happen, because there's just so many variables at play.

Danny Lang:

So, I go in, and it could be as easy as I'm trying to find a little bit of engagement, but then, trying to find a focus. So usually, it's, "Hey, man, it's great to see you. It's been a week since we've seen last, and I'm really curious how things are going for you this week, and what's been happening? And what do you want to talk about today? What's been going on." I'm curious, and I'm excited. I think that's important for me, in my approach, I'm curious and excited. And even if they're depressed and miserable, I'm trying to maintain a bit of hope in dark times.

Danny Lang:

And so, if everything has changed since last time I met them, so I met up with an individual this week, and from the last time I met, where he was calm and collected, and his anger was quite calm, his impulsivity was quite low, he was doing fairly well, and he was able to articulate well. I'm meeting with him, and his speech is pressured, he's angry about some things that have happened. He's telling me about seven or eight things at once. They're coming like 100 miles an hour, and I'm trying to ... he's doing 80, and I'm doing 50. Kilometers, not miles. Kilometers.

Danny Lang:

And my mind is thinking, what the heck do I talk about? Where do I go with this? What do I do? Am capable of helping this individual today? Can I do this? What the heck? I just came from another stressful experience with a client. How can I be helpful today? And then I kind of just, and I've said it, I take a breath, and maybe sometimes I even ask the client to take a breath with me. I just say, "Dude, man, you are moving ..." And I may say this. "Dude, you are moving fast today. Wow, man, you're doing 80." And I will use this analogy. "I'm only doing 40. And I'm willing to meet you at 50, 55, if you could just come down a little bit for me." And then we kind of, just the negotiation right there.

Danny Lang:

Sometimes take a couple of breaths, and I'm like, "Man, tell me what's going on. I want to hear what's going on for you, and let's just try to find a focus." And then, at least let them talk a little bit, and kind of use reflective listening, some curious questions, evocative, to kind of narrow the topic and get down. And even say, "Listen, man, we've got an hour, or 45 minutes today. What is it most that you need to tell me?" And generally, people can do that. They know what they really want to tell me. And it's usually tied into a few other things, but people really want to know.

Glenn Hinds:

I'm just struck by how moving hearing you say that is, Danny, the kindness, the compassion in your desire to reach that person where they're at, in a way that allows them to feel your efforts to connect with them. And just that, recognizing what we as human beings are prepared to do when we see someone else's efforts to reach us. They



see you take the step first, and the invitation is, "Look, I'm hoping you come towards me," but you're willing to come towards them wherever they are. And I guess again, for individuals who find themselves on the street for whatever reasons, their experience of human beings along their life's journey have not necessarily included many people who are willing to be as patient, and as kind, and as considerate as you sound when you say what you say in reaching out to them.

Glenn Hinds:

So, I guess for a lot of them, it's quite strange to have a dude walk up to them on the street and be as kind to them as you are, and how moving that must be for them at some level. You described earlier on yourself, the container, and your willingness to let that individual be held by you as they begin to explore themselves and the choices that they have.

Danny Lang:

It's really actually interesting hearing it back, because I don't know, how often do I talk about this? Not very often, right? This is things that, when I'm doing in my training, sure, it comes out. However, yeah, it's just, this is how I think about these individuals, and yeah, it's nice to talk about it if it's helpful for others. I hope it is.

Danny Lang:

I know you brought it up, and the topic is homelessness and marginalized populations, or people with mental illness, but for me, I try to just approach it as this is another human being, just another human being that needs some talking to, and how do we do it, right? How can I have the conversation? And so, I'm trying to approach it in similar ways, and just recognizing the dance.

Danny Lang:

I had a couple of individuals lately, and I think this is really important when we're practicing MI, because sometimes we think it's MI for everything, right? And do I believe the skills of MI are useful for people in this world? Absolutely. Do I believe that it's always for every case? No. I've had a couple gentlemen lately where I said to them, "Listen, man, I'm not sure I'm being of help to you right now. I'm not really sure where we're going to go, or how helpful I am to you." And what they said to me was, "Just you being here and being with me in this moment is enough."

Danny Lang:

Okay, so that means all I've got to do is just give them presence, right? I've just got to give them some spirit, and we can have some casual conversation, and if change talk pops, then we can go with it, if they want to. It doesn't mean I have to. I think it's important to stress that, because not every conversation I have will be, it's not always like, bang, bang, we're banging it out. Sometimes it's just us being together in each other's presence, for as long as that could be. Two minutes, five minutes. Sometimes it's longer, 10, 20. Yeah, up to an hour is generally what I have with an individual.



Danny Lang:

So, I think that's just one thing I wanted to highlight. It sounds all rosy, but if I come up and see somebody, and they're not doing well because they're coming off fentanyl, or they're still in the middle of their high, and they've mixed it with something else, or they're doing some weird dance or something, I'm just going to be there to say, "Hey, it's Danny. I'm here, man. I'm so glad to see you. I am going to come back. I'm going to be back here again, and I'll see you later." Some message like that, and I go along my way. It's this whole wide range of how we enter and how we set it up for later conversations as well, I think is important.

Sebastian Kaplan:

It really is hard to overstate the value of the relationship, and it's really at the core of all the fancy, jargon-y stuff that we might talk about with complex reflections, and softening sustained talk, or whatever it might be. All of that is great, but maybe you're going to have a five-minute conversation with somebody, and you're not going to do any of that stuff. And the quality of the relationship, and the kind of relationship could be informed, perhaps, by MI and some of the tenets of the MI spirit, perhaps, but just really important to emphasize that.

Sebastian Kaplan:

And I guess, I would assume that there are some people that come to MI thinking of it, or learning of it, as this brief intervention, two or three visits, and all of the sudden, the person's changed. And there is evidence to support the use of MI as a brief intervention, but humanity is complex enough that not everybody's going to react in the same way, and maybe it's a call for providers of any kind to, when things don't seem to be working in the way that you're expecting them to work, to have something to fall back on that you can trust, which is basic relational skills, and making sure that the connection is there, and all the other technical, jargon-y, strategery, that will come eventually, provided that the connection's there and it's strong.

Danny Lang:

You know, absolutely. I think, as I've gotten, I've changed my practice over the years. I think that's really where I've gone, to this field. I'm sure you guys have had Steve Rollnick on here, and I forget his exact words of saying it, but he said something, as he's gotten older, he's learned to try not to be so smart. And that always sat with me. Like, stop trying to be so smart, Danny. Just don't. Don't do that. Just try to be less smart, and just be with the individual. And for me, it naturally comes.

Danny Lang:

For those people listening to this, I think it's really important to understand, this is my style, and I've just kind of put MI into my style. So, whatever your style is, whatever your gifts are that you approach clients with, or individuals, or participants, or whatever you call the people you help. However you approach them, it's you, but then MI fits within you and how you do it.



Danny Lang:

This is how I see MI. When I'm telling people this in training, I mean, this is how Danny approaches it. This is my model. This is how I think about it: The container, engaging, three circles, we're moving in and out. But how you get there is going to be you and what you bring. Can we all have better patience and empathy? Absolutely. Could we work on our compassion? Absolutely. But at the same time, this is how I figure right now works best for me, and for the population I'm working with, the people I'm supporting. And I keep adapting it. When people give me feedback, I adapt it.

Glenn Hinds:

The continuous movement. Sometimes it's quicker than others. Sometimes it's left, sometimes it's right, depending who you're with and what you find yourself doing. And what struck me was something you were saying earlier on. I'm not sure if it was Terri Moyers, or one of the other MI practitioners where I've heard this, where it's that idea that sometimes someone needs a bloody good listening to. If that's what we did for people, was just give them a bloody good listening to, human beings really respond to that willingness of another person to attend to them, and experience the connection.

Glenn Hinds:

I'm thinking about the conversation we had with Bill Neto. He talked about the old brain, the threat that we're always scanning for, because of what other people represent to us. That what the research seems to suggest is that when people meet practitioners who act in a way consistent with the spirit of Motivational Interviewing, their threat experience diminishes, and therefore they can engage their own frontal cortex where their own reasoning exists, where they can then start to think about how to solve things for themselves.

Glenn Hinds:

And again, it sounds like that's all of what you're trying to do when you're meeting people, is trying to understand, what is their experience of me right now, and what can I do to make them feel a little safer, and then explore what, if anything, that they need or want from me in the 5, 15, 25 minutes that they have with me.

Danny Lang:

Even just this conversation makes me reflect on my practice right now, if you know what I mean, and how going forward, on Monday, how I might approach my next person I'm working with. You know what I mean? And I appreciate that research. That's actually really nice, Glenn. Thank you for sharing that, actually, because it makes me think about some of the things, when you do listen, what they come up with, it's amazing. It's actually really amazing, you know? It's like, wow, they actually do know exactly what they need, and all I did was just sit there and listen and bob my head a little bit, and make a couple of reflections. Sometimes it can be as easy as that, I think, even though that's hard, really. It is the art of listening, and like in Bill Miller's book there, I think it's, what, Listening Well? Yeah, fantastic read, but the importance of how important it is to just sit with somebody



and actually have your attentive ear, without a phone, without distractions, without looking left or right, without looking behind. You're just being attentive to their needs.

Sebastian Kaplan:

And thinking about conversations I've had with psychiatry residents who I train at work, or maybe a medical student or something, and sometimes you can hear the disappointment in their voice when they say things like, "Well, I don't know that I really did anything. I just listened to them." And that just, the word just, right before the word listen, is like, they might as well have just canceled the visit. I'm glad when I hear that, because I take that as an opportunity to say, "Actually, maybe that was the most important thing that could have happened."

Sebastian Kaplan:

Again, you referenced Steve Rollnick there, Danny, and I think the word that he uses is clever. I've been greatly influenced by hearing him talk about, don't be so clever, myself. And that's got to be hard, because we've put in a lot of effort into learning the stuff that we know, to try to be helpful. And so, what are we supposed to do with all that stuff? Just listen? Is that it? After all these years training and schooling, and money, and tears? But yeah, it's like, that stuff will be useful, but that's, the core of it, I guess, comes back to the relational pieces, and yes, just listening. And that's really where the crux of the work is, and the other stuff will kind of fit in along the edges, perhaps.

Danny Lang:

I was thinking, as you were talking about it, it was like, when we're just listening, we actually find the focus, because then I can quiet my mind down enough to actually hear what the focus could be for the conversation. Or at least ask for, reflect to find, to clarify if this is what's most important. But when I'm not listening, I already have a focus. And most of the time, and I'm using it in kind of an absolute, but most of the time, I'm wrong. That's not the focus. It may be a part of a focus, but it's not the focus. And so, I think that's been helpful, when/if I can get there.

Danny Lang:

And ultimately, I'm sure it's come up on this show many times, people just don't want to be told what to do, you know? They just don't want to be told what to do. If you come from a system predominantly that has stolen your autonomy, and forgive **determines**, that's a strong word, that's really impacted your autonomy for years, and whether it's mental health system, where you've been told to take meds, forced to take meds, kept in hospitals to take meds, picked up by the police, who could have roughed you up. There's a lot of things that being respectful of people's autonomy and listening really just does, as Glenn said, opens up these beautiful opportunities for people just to come up with the ideas themselves, versus me trying to just do another bad replay of what they've experienced before, if that's fair to say.

Glenn Hinds:



I'm conscious of our time. It sounds like what you're encouraging us think about, and many of our guests have brought us to the same place, which is that we as practitioners are on our own journey of development, that we are in our own process of change, to be skillful, to be more effective in our practice. And it sounds like when you were introduced to Motivational Interviewing, you were already doing a lot of good work. You were already supporting a lot of people that were meeting. What Motivational Interviewing offered you was a way of enhancing what it was you did, and in many ways, it sounds like it's made your life easier, and it sounds like you carried less responsibility, you had to make less effort to find solutions for all the people. The work that it involved was practicing being mindful, being trustful, being curious, believing in the other. That became the effort for you, rather than saying, "Look, you should be doing this, you should stop doing that," and coming up with solutions.

Glenn Hinds:

And it's brought you to this, where you are still on that journey. It has often been said that you have been learning from your clients, your service users, and the people you come into contact with, to fine-tune your listening skills, to fine-tune your empathy, to fine-tune your compassion, because that's what you endeavor to do. That's your group's target. And it sounds like you're also learning to do that more and more with yourself and the work that you're doing.

Glenn Hinds:

So, Danny, we really appreciate that you've come along, and sharing with us what you have, and I'm sure there's going to be lots of people out there who will have questions for you, and one of the questions we will ask you at the end is if people want, can they contact you? But at this point in the podcast, we traditionally then offer our guests the opportunity to maybe take a side road, if you wish, and just answer the question, what else is going on for you at the moment? What else is catching your attention, that may be MI-related, it may not. What's going on for you that you could tell us a bit about?

Danny Lang:

There's been a couple of years now. It's been a long time, but a couple of years where I've been really focusing on it. I've been in martial arts pretty much since I was 12. Long time. And the last number of years, I've been working quite a lot with the team for sport karate, so sparring, as well as kata and weapons. And really working with the team. So, I've been doing a lot of coaching, and really kind of being there to help these young athletes develop and work through fears, and work through the excitements and learn to manage it, how to be mindful, how to focus in the moment, how to work through the pressure of coming up to a match or coming up to a tournament before you step in the ring.

Danny Lang:

These are things that have been really, I think they've been a really positive thing in my life, and they're quite, it inspires me to watch these young athletes working at managing difficult tasks, I don't mean this badly, but I don't think often the world teaches them. So,



martial arts inherently allows these lessons to be taught, because that's what we're helping people to work through. And so, it just provides this nice venue to teach these young adults and kids skills that can really help them in life.

Danny Lang:

Yeah, and Motivational Interviewing just kind of falls right into that naturally, in this really strength-based, autonomous way of building up a partnership with people, and coach them in a way that you can help them move forward.

Sebastian Kaplan:

Yeah, and some of our audience might know the kind of recent, it's sort of a new direction in MI, is working with athletes and coaches and sports teams, and some of our friends and colleagues, Jeff Breckon in the UK, Steve Rollnick actually, also, have written some really good work on this topic. Certainly an exciting direction that MI is taking, and something that you seem to be, again, kind of blending in something that has been really important for you since you were, well, literally a child, and now here you are as an adult, trying to give back, but also using some of your MI work, which is really wonderful.

Sebastian Kaplan:

So, Danny, as we approach the end of our conversation today, would you be willing to have people contact you with questions, and if so, how could they reach you.

Danny Lang:

Yeah. Just through email would be fine, that would be great. My email address there is D-K-L-A-N-G, DKLang46@gmail.com.

Glenn Hinds:

Cool, and are you a Twitter person? Is there a social media that people can follow?

Danny Lang:

I have Instagram. It's, yeah, DannyLang613, which is our area code here in Ottawa. So, yeah, DannyLang613.

Glenn Hinds:

Fantastic. I suppose I just want to share with you, it was interesting how you were describing your relationship with the martial arts and MI. It just, Yoda came into my mind, and the program when I was younger, where the martial arts master talked to his student who he called Grasshopper. And I was just wondering ...

Danny Lang:

Kato

Glenn Hinds:



I just had this image of an MI Yoda, just supporting people through that way. But thank you, Danny, for your willingness to allow people to contact you, and maybe Seb, if you could just remind people how they can contact us, as well?

Sebastian Kaplan:

Sure. Again, Facebook is Talking To Change. Instagram is Taking To Change Podcast. Twitter is @ChangeTalking, and any questions, feedback, comments, you can email us at podcast@GlennHinds.com.

Sebastian Kaplan:

So, Danny, thank you so much for joining us. This has been really, really interesting. Appreciate it.

Danny Lang:

Guys, thank you. Pleasure, man, and yeah, sincerely, thank you so much for having me on your show. Kindly appreciated it. Thank you. It's been great.

Glenn Hinds:

You're brilliant. Thanks, Danny.

Danny Lang:

Thank you.

Glenn Hinds:

Take care. Cheers, Seb.

Sebastian Kaplan:

All right, Glenn, good to see you. Until next time.

Glenn Hinds:

Thank you. Take care. Bye.

