

Motivational Interviewing Example Conversation

Part 1

Actor notes: Taylor is respectful and reflective.

Chris's mood is bitter and dejected.

Taylor: Hi Chris. How are things going?

Chris: Awful. I lost my job. Now I'm spending more time at home, and I have two not so great neighbors on each side one has been harassing me for 5 years. I am all alone, don't have any friends that are close here...

Taylor: Wow, it sounds like you are facing some serious life stuff and you are feeling isolated on top of that.

Chris: Yeah. I've been depressed since losing my job. I've been taking my medications to stabilize my mood for my bipolar... I feel like I need something good to happen to me, because there's been so much bad.

Taylor: It's exhausting when you go for a long time without anything positive.

Chris: I am exhausted. I just feel overwhelmed with my problems... I was a good worker and the manager liked me, but my immediate supervisor was terrible. But he has power, so he was able to fire me. It wasn't even about how I was working – he just didn't like me as a person.

Taylor: So even when you were working you were under a lot of pressure and couldn't relax.

Chris: Right! I can't even figure out what he thought I was doing... It doesn't matter anymore. I am such a loser. I will never have a career.

Taylor: That's a really heavy thought to carry.

Chris: It is, but it feels accurate. You know this isn't the first job I've lost. I'm ashamed of my diagnosis and I don't think anyone will ever want me for a job. After this one I was desperate. I wrote the manager saying, "hey I got an award for the amount of overtime I worked. the letter you wrote me said that I am the kind of worker you want, so either you are a liar, or I'm the kind of worker you want."

Taylor: It sounds like you take pride in being a very hard worker.

Chris: I do. I keep trying and trying, but I think I'm just not the kind of person people want to be around. There's something wrong with me that makes people not like me, whether it's my neighbors or my supervisor. I don't need everybody to like me; I just want to be able to support myself.

Taylor: It seems like that would feel devastating – to think that something about you makes people dislike you. I want you to know – I like you.

Chris: Thanks. Yeah. I'm just trying to be realistic. I know I have problems and I know I'm abrasive. I just want to be able to get by on my own.

Taylor: What is the more important issue for you right now, not having a job, or feeling like people dislike you?

Chris: Not having a job is the bigger issue. I don't have much money, and if I don't have a job in another couple of weeks, I won't be able to pay my bills. I *need* to work.

Taylor: OK. So you want to focus on finding another job.

Chris: Yeah. I just worry that I won't be able to find one that wants me.

Taylor: So both issues matter, because you need confidence to be able to look for a job.

Part 2

Actor notes: Taylor is proud of the helpful ideas Taylor has come up with. Taylor feels impatient when Chris doesn't acknowledge that the ideas are good. Taylor starts to think that Chris is being lazy and manipulative and needs some "tough love."

Chris feels pressured and judged. Chris is afraid of losing the relationship with Taylor, but doesn't want to be forced into doing something he thinks he can't handle right now.

Taylor: What have you tried so far to find a new job?

Chris: Nothing yet. I felt so angry and stupid I haven't had it in me to start looking for a new job yet. Honestly, I have this huge fear that my bipolar will prevent me from being able to find or keep a job.

Taylor: You're not stupid, and you don't know that your bipolar diagnosis will get in the way. Since this is a fear that you have, though, how would you feel about applying for social security disability, based on the bipolar diagnosis?

Chris: I tried to apply, but it's so overwhelming. It's a huge amount of paperwork and I feel so ashamed with every answer – it's like I'm telling the government how worthless I am and asking them to pay me for being worthless.

Taylor: Don't say you're worthless. Social Security Disability exists for exactly these types of situations. When you've worked in your previous jobs, you paid taxes, and this is one of the things your tax dollars support. You have a right to get the help.

Chris: Yeah, but, I feel worthless when I do it. It's not the way I was raised. I want to be able to be independent. I want to get money because of what I can do, not because of what I can't do.

Taylor: Yes, but you said yourself you still need to pay your bills. You might qualify for unemployment. Have you applied?

Chris: No, I haven't. I did that the last time I lost my job, and they called my boss who made this big deal about how I was a terrible employee and deserved to get fired, and the unemployment people sided with him. It was humiliating.

Taylor: If you're not willing to apply for unemployment or Social Security, then you'll have to keep trying to find a job. You know you'll need to start applying soon if you want to get a job in time to pay your bills.

Chris: I know, but I needed a breather because I was upset.

Taylor: Have you been to Workforce Development since you got fired?

Chris: No.

Taylor: Workforce development has lists of current job openings in the community that they print off each week. There are many jobs you can apply for.

Chris: (sounding irritated) I know. I've been to Workforce Development before. I just haven't been there yet this time.

Taylor: If you know about everything that Workforce Development offers, then why haven't you been there this time?

Chris: They aren't open every day, and I just didn't have the energy to go in on the days they were open.

Taylor: They're open today. You can go pick up that list and circle all of the jobs that you're qualified for, and then I can help you polish your resume to apply for all of those jobs.

Chris: (starting to disengage) I don't think I have time to do all that today.

Taylor: Why not? You should have lots of time, considering you're not working and you said you're spending more time at home.

Chris: Yeah, but this is a lot, and like I said before, people tend to not like me. It's pointless.

Taylor: When you tell yourself it's pointless, that's what makes you not try. You need to put in a lot of effort in order to find a job. Don't let thoughts like "it's pointless" stand in the way of that.

Chris: (angry) That's easy for you to say. You haven't been fired five times. This isn't just a "thought." It's the way it is. It is devastating to me because all I really ever wanted to do is work. And even if I get a job, I will worry every single day that I will be laid off that day. It's a vicious circle.

Part 3

Actor notes: Taylor realizes Taylor was being aggressive and changes tactics to listen more fully to what Chris needs. Taylor is respectful and reflective.

By the end of the conversation, Chris is engaged with Taylor and starting to feel hopeful.

Taylor: Chris, I apologize. I've been fired from a job before, and you're right. It's devastating. I can see why you needed some time, and I'm sorry for pushing you.

Chris: Thank you. That's the thing. I've crashed really hard since I got fired, and it's hard to even get out of bed. I can't believe you've been fired, too. What did you do?

Taylor: You know, I don't think there's just one right way to get through it. You know your situation better than anyone else. What do you want to have happen?

Chris: Getting a job where my mental illness won't be a problem, I guess. Or magically becoming a person with normal relationships that other people like to be around.

Taylor: You don't want to be treated differently from anyone else.

Chris: Right! I think that's why my neighbors are bothering me so much more since I lost my job. It's just one more situation where I'm being treated like a freak. I know I get on people's nerves, and when supervisors find out I have a mental illness, they're afraid it will make me an unreliable worker, you know what I mean?

Taylor: I do. I also see that besides having a mental illness, you're also a person who puts in long hours because work is important to you, and you've had at least one manager who really liked you.

Chris: (sniffles, pauses) Yeah. That's fair. It's hard to look at it that way because I've had so much go wrong lately. When so much has gone wrong, you have to ask yourself, 'What's the common thread?' And it's me.

Taylor: From what you've told me, it sounds like it's important to you to work, and you're struggling with feeling worthless, which is making it hard for you to put yourself back out there.

Chris: Exactly. I'm scared that I won't be able to cut it. Every time this happens I just feel more worthless, and it's so draining to apply and be rejected. I'm afraid to start.

Taylor: What is something you can do today to help you feel better so that tomorrow or next week or whenever you'll feel more ready to face a job search?

Chris: That's a good question. I want to do something to feel better because I can't wait forever to get started. It's helped to talk it through, but I don't know what else to do.

Taylor: You said some things about yourself earlier that were really hard on yourself. What things do you do that you are good at or take pride in?

Chris: I'm good at working with my hands.

Taylor: What kinds of stuff do you do?

Chris: (with pride) I fix electronics and sometimes I make things out of wood.

Taylor: That's a useful skill! How would you feel about doing some small project like that today?

Chris: It's a good idea. It does make me feel good when I accomplish something like that. Fixing my fence would keep my neighbor off my back, too. I just don't think I have the energy right now.

Taylor: That's OK. Your voice sounded a lot calmer while you talked about what you're good at. What if you made a list of things you're good at to remind yourself?

Chris. (pauses) I think I might do that. It's so easy to just fall into this spiral of being mad at myself. It's hard to remember the things I'm good at when I'm in this state of mind.
Thank you.

Taylor: How do you feel right now?

Chris: I feel a lot better. Thank you for listening.

Taylor: I'm glad you came in. I hope to see you again soon to find out how you're doing.

Chris: Thank you.