# Entering the Sacred: Using Motivational Interviewing to Address Spirituality in Counseling

By: Craig S. Cashwell and Amanda L. Giordano.

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**Abstract:**

Despite the salience of spirituality in the lives of many clients, counselors are often hesitant to explore spiritual issues in counseling, largely out of a valid concern of imposing values on the client. Motivational interviewing provides a framework within which a counselor can both assess spirituality and facilitate client exploration of spiritual issues without fear of imposing values.

**Keywords:** motivational interviewing | spirituality | clinical practice

**Article:**

In the past 20 years, there has been clear evidence that spirituality is a vital aspect of an individual's culture and development and, as such, simply cannot be ignored in the counseling process (Cashwell & Young, 2011). Meta-analytic studies have shown that interventions that incorporate religion and spirituality produce client gains in both the spiritual and psychological domains that are superior to those of secular interventions (Worthington, Hook, Davis, & McDaniel, 2011). Furthermore, the inclusion of spirituality in counseling is an ethical imperative. The*ACA Code of Ethics* (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005) requires that counselors acknowledge the importance of spiritual leaders (Standard A.1.d.), support spiritual needs as part of end-of-life care (Standard A.9.a.1.), engage in spiritual self-care (Section C, Introduction), avoid discrimination based on spirituality (Standard C.5.), and recognize the influence of spirituality in the assessment process (Standard E.8.). Additionally, a primary mandate of the *ACA Code of Ethics* is to respect the dignity and promote the welfare of clients (Standard A.1.a.). Because addressing religious and spiritual issues can increase counseling effectiveness (Propst, 1996), the importance of including spirituality in counseling seems clear.

It is apparent that the growing appreciation for addressing spirituality in counseling is affecting counselor preparation. Kelly (1994) found that only 25% of accredited counselor preparation programs addressed spirituality in their curriculum. Eight years later, however, Young, Cashwell, Frame, and Belaire (2002) found that 69% of accredited counseling programs included spirituality in their curriculum, due in part to increased attention to spirituality in the Council for

Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2001) Standards. More recently, Dobmeier and Reiner (2012) found that 84% of a sample of interns from accredited counseling programs stated that spirituality had been included in their curriculum.

Furthermore, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) has developed and refined a set of 14 competencies for addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). Organized into six sections (Culture and Worldview, Counselor Self-Awareness, Human and Spiritual Development, Communication, Assessment, and Diagnosis and Treatment), these ASERVIC competencies provide minimal expectations for effectively working with spiritual issues in counseling. Of particular interest for the current article is Competency 7: "The professional counselor responds to client communications about spirituality and/or religion with acceptance and sensitivity" (Cashwell & Watts, 2010, p. 5). That is, counselors enter into any conversations with clients with acceptance, compassion, and respect for the clients' spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences.

However, Competency 7 seems to be a perceived stumbling block for many counseling students and counseling practitioners. Researchers have found that concern of imposing values is a substantive barrier that keeps many counselors from assessing client spirituality and integrating spirituality into the counseling process (Cashwell et al., 2013; Frazier & Hansen, 2009). In fact, some counselors appear to be saying that (a) they will only discuss issues of spirituality if the client brings it up or (b) they are unclear how to incorporate spirituality without imposing their values and, consequently, avoid such discussions even when clients initiate the topic (Cashwell et al., 2013). Thus, a fear of imposing values and uncertainty about how to discuss these issues serve as substantial barriers to facilitating client exploration of spirituality. The real issue for counselors may well be not whether to address spirituality but how to go about it (Cashwell & Young, 2011).

Moreover, these struggles to effectively integrate spirituality into counseling may be exacerbated by training practices. Adams (2012) found that 39.8% of surveyed counseling students indicated that they were taught, either implicitly or explicitly, that it is inappropriate or unethical to discuss religious/spiritual issues with clients. This raises the concern that educators' discomfort with spiritual and religious issues may, in some instances, be transferred to students.

Miller (2004), one of the originators of motivational interviewing (MI), expanded this concern by noting that many clients enter counseling "profoundly ambivalent about exploring their spirituality" (p. 3) and noted that the initial phase of counseling involves working through this ambivalence. If many counselors avoid discussions of spirituality because of a fear of imposing values and many clients are "profoundly ambivalent" about exploring spiritual issues, it seems clear that the ethical directive to integrate spirituality into counseling may often get lost. How, then, are we as counselors to address clients' profound ambivalence amid our own concerns about imposing values? Zinnbauer and Pargament (2000) delineated that counselors working with the sacred should operate from within either a constructivist or a pluralist perspective, avoiding approaches that either deny the salience of spirituality in the client's life or assert that the counselor and client must share the one "true" religious or spiritual worldview. MI provides a means to facilitate the process of working with client ambivalence related to issues of spirituality without imposing beliefs but rather with the aim of helping clients to become

unstuck. Miller and Rollnick (2002) described the use of nondirective MI in which "the counselor is not interested in directing the resolution of ambivalence toward any particular kind of change. The goal is to help people explore the options and their possible consequences in relation to their own values and goals" (p. 91).

## MI and Spiritual Issues in Counseling

MI has been conceptually linked to elements of spirituality in counseling, such as spiritual bypass (Clarke, Giordano, Cashwell, & Lewis, 2013), spiritual evocation (Miller, 2004), spiritual aspects of addictions treatment (Delaney, Forcehimes, Campbell, & Smith, 2009), and specific belief systems such as Christian therapy (Martin & Sihn, 2009). Although direct empirical support is scarce, the utility of the approach with regard to topics related to spirituality is clear. Knox, Catlin, Casper, and Schlosser (2005) investigated clients' perceptions of addressing spiritual and religious issues in therapy. The clients in their study presented with anxiety, depression, trauma, and family concerns and also reported addressing spiritual/religious issues over the course of therapy. Clients described their discussions related to religion and spirituality as helpful when they perceived their therapist as open and accepting; however, the discussions were unhelpful when the therapist was perceived as judgmental or imposing beliefs (Knox et al., 2005). This has strong implications for the effectiveness of an approach such as MI in that it seeks to elicit client intrinsic motivation for change rather than imposing external motivation.

Additionally, within the MI literature, Miller and Rollnick (2002) described the exploration of goals and values as an important component of eliciting change talk from clients, and researchers have found change talk to be predictive of positive counseling outcomes (Apodaca & Longabaugh, 2009). As MI counselors encourage clients to identify and articulate their values, discrepancy is developed between the clients' current behaviors and the values with which they align (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Increases in client discrepancy also have been linked to better counseling outcomes (Apodaca & Longabaugh, 2009). Commonly, there is a strong association between one's personal value system and beliefs about spirituality and religion and one's sense of purpose and meaning. Accordingly, the applicability of MI with spiritual issues in counseling seems appropriate.

Thus, previous findings in the literature encourage continued exploration of utilizing MI within the context of spiritual issues in counseling and support the notion that MI may provide helpful structure for counselors who avoid integrating spirituality into counseling because they are concerned about imposing values. Next, we provide an overview of MI, followed by two case examples that demonstrate the application of the MI approach to spirituality issues in counseling.

## The Spirit of MI

The heart of MI has been deemed *MI spirit*, referring to the underlying, foundational components necessary for effectively applying the approach (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). MI spirit consists of three elements (collaboration, evocation, and autonomy) and has been empirically linked to increased client collaboration, the expression of affect, and client disclosure (Moyers, Miller, & Hendrickson, 2005). Counselors who embrace a stance of collaboration foster a partnership with clients in order to facilitate change. Rather than prescribing solutions to client issues or assuming

an authoritative role in the counseling relationship, MI counselors seek to join with clients in the exploration of their ambivalence around change. Therefore, as clients present with ambivalence related to their spiritual lives, MI counselors do not adopt the role of spiritual expert with answers to bestow. Instead, counselors and clients form an alliance and move together in the direction of spiritual exploration, growth, and change.

Evocation refers to the process of eliciting the desire, ability, and readiness to change from within clients as opposed to imposing change on them (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). MI counselors believe that clients possess the resourcefulness, insight, and capability to make positive changes in their lives and it is the counselor's role to help draw these intrinsic elements out of the clients (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). MI counselors invite clients who are ambivalent about change pertaining to their spiritual lives to access and bring forth their own motivation for spiritual change in the desired direction.

Finally, autonomy consists of respecting clients' ownership of their change experiences. Although MI counselors are available to aid in exploration, offer support, and facilitate the process, clients are ultimately responsible for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). With regard to helping professionals and client spiritual issues, researchers have highlighted the need for a balance between the extremes of imposing religious or spiritual beliefs onto clients and overrespecting client autonomy to the point of sustaining detrimental beliefs (Rosenfeld, 2011). MI is a useful tool in striking this balance because "the goal is to increase intrinsic motivation, so that change arises from within rather than being imposed from without and so that change serves the person's own goals and values" (Miller & Rollnick, 2002, p. 34). Thus, the MI counselor relies on the client's personal goals, values, and intrinsic motivation to facilitate the resolution of ambivalence related to spirituality.

**Four Principals of MI**

The MI approach builds on the foundation of the MI spirit and has four principles that serve to aid in the elicitation of client motivation to change: (a) expressing empathy, (b) developing discrepancy, (c) rolling with resistance, and (d) supporting self-efficacy (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). In the first principle, *expressing empathy*, MI counselors cultivate an atmosphere of acceptance devoid of judgment, criticism, or condemnation. MI counselors use artfully applied reflections to convey understanding in order to normalize clients' experience of ambivalence. For a client experiencing ambivalence related to taking steps toward spiritual exploration, the MI counselor operates from a stance of acceptance while seeking to normalize and validate the client's struggle with delving into uncharted territories of spirituality.

The second principle, *developing discrepancy*, involves highlighting disconnects between clients' current behavior and identified values and goals. For example, a client may describe her efforts to avoid exploring her spirituality and sense of purpose because she feels wary about this area. Later, she discloses that her goal is to achieve more balance in life, stating, "I just want to feel complete and whole rather than compartmentalized." The counselor can develop discrepancy by helping the client reflect on this quandary, where on the one hand she avoids exploring her spirituality and on the other she longs for integration and wholeness of all facets of herself.

The third principle, *rolling with resistance*, refers to acknowledging the side of ambivalence that supports the "no change" status quo. Resistance is viewed as normal, and MI counselors respond by reflecting, reframing, shifting the focus of dialogue, and confirming clients' control over their change process (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). For the client who states a desire to integrate spirituality into her or his life but expresses resistance related to incorporating spiritual practices or applying spiritual principles, the counselor may use a double-sided reflection by stating, for example, "The thought of taking action in your spiritual life seems daunting and perhaps a little frightening and, at the same time, there is a part of you that is dissatisfied with your current experience of spirituality."

Finally, *supporting self-efficacy* involves increasing clients' beliefs in their ability to make desired changes. MI counselors may inquire about past experiences in which clients were successful in attempts to make positive change. For example, a counselor might ask a client who is ambivalent about exploring spirituality to reflect on past experiences in which he has followed through with his decision to investigate an unknown topic or try a new activity. By expanding on his examples, the client may increase his confidence in his ability to explore spirituality.

## MI Change Talk

The spirit of MI and the four principles of the MI approach are used to facilitate client motivation for change. When clients speak of the disadvantages of not changing and the advantages of changing, express optimism about making a change, or talk about their intention to change, MI counselors recognize these statements as *change talk* (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Counselors elicit, reflect, and summarize client language supporting change throughout the MI process. For example, a client experiencing ambivalence with regard to spiritual exploration may state, "For the last several years, I've been moving in the opposite direction of anything related to religion, or a Higher Power, or whatever you call it, but I can't seem to escape the sense that I'm missing something." The MI counselor would hear the client's identification of a disadvantage related to not changing. To reflect and emphasize this change talk, the counselor may respond, "So a part of you is hesitant to move toward anything spiritual, yet going in the opposite direction leaves you feeling incomplete." In this way, change talk is highlighted and expounded upon, thus increasing motivation for change.

## Assessing Spirituality

Much has been written about the quantitative and qualitative assessment of spirituality, and many approaches are readily available to thoroughly assess the spiritual domain (Sperry, 2012). For the purpose of working within an MI framework, however, a lengthy assessment, in whatever form, might be experienced by the client as the counselor arguing for change (i.e., spirituality will be a point of emphasis in our work together). Such an approach may lead the client to argue for the other side of the ambivalence paradigm (i.e., no focus on spirituality).

When counselors work in a setting where a preliminary intake form is completed, either by the client or through an interview, we recommend three assessment questions related to the client's spiritual/religious life to explore whether this is an area in which the client would like to change. Although the assessment component is relevant to all clients, clients' responses determine

whether or not counselors pursue the integration of spirituality. If a client has no interest in addressing spirituality in counseling, that choice should be respected. Miller and Rollnick (2009) stated, "if someone genuinely has no inherent motivation for making a change, MI cannot manufacture it" (p. 131). Thus, MI is not a means to trick clients into exploring spirituality. The counselor can first ask: Is this an area in which the client would like to explore change, and in what way might the client and counselor proceed in that exploration? This serves to reflect the three dimensions of motivation for change described by Miller and Rollnick (2002), namely, importance, confidence, and readiness. We suggest the following three assessment questions:

- Assessing importance: "On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 representing *none* and 10 representing *extremely high*, how important is it for you to make changes in your spiritual or religious life?"
- Assessing confidence: "Using the same scale, if you decided you wanted to do something different in your spiritual or religious life, how confident are you that you could do it?"
- Assessing readiness: "Is this something you want to discuss in counseling?"

The phrase *spiritual or religious* in the first two questions is important for clients who distinguish between spirituality and religion, although researchers have found that many people do not make this distinction (Koenig, George, & Titus, 2004).

Using these assessment questions, MI counselors can determine whether the ambivalence to change is related to a lack of importance regarding work in the spiritual or religious realm, a lack of confidence in one's ability to make desired changes, or both. If the importance rating is low, but the client consistently discusses material with spiritual themes, this discrepancy could be explored. If confidence is low, counselors may explore clients' sense of self-efficacy and brainstorm possible avenues for change that clients deem feasible.

Although the dimensions of importance and confidence are certainly necessary for client change, a degree of readiness must exist in order for the work to begin. Therefore, the last assessment question ("Is this something you want to discuss in counseling?") is essential. Although clients may believe work in their spiritual or religious lives is important and feel confident in their ability to do the work, they may not feel ready to address the change issue in counseling. After a sufficient therapeutic relationship has been established, the MI counselor can explore this with clients.

**Case Examples**

Once the three assessment questions have been explored, counselors can continue using an MI approach to facilitate change related to clients' spiritual and/or religious lives. We believe MI is a reasonable approach for clients who present in a state of ambivalence with regard to religiousness, spirituality, meaning making, personal values, and sense of purpose. Although many other approaches exist, MI is unique in that it offers an empirically supported means to resolve ambivalence related to a variety of behaviors and presenting concerns (Mason, 2009). Therefore, when applied to the spiritual domain, MI does not attempt to provide spiritual direction but rather cultivates clients' intrinsic motivation to become unstuck in their ambivalence. Because MI is a brief approach that may be used as a precursor to another form of

treatment or integrated within another treatment strategy (Burke et al., 2002), we propose that MI may be an effective addition to current clinical practice within this context rather than a replacement. The following fictional case vignettes provide examples of how counselors can apply MI to spiritual and religious issues in counseling.

**Ambivalence Around Spiritual Beliefs**

Glenn is a 54-year-old man in early recovery from a substance addiction who continues to struggle with sobriety. Glenn grew up in a religious family and reports that religion was highly salient for him until recently. When asked about spiritual beliefs and practices, Glenn stated that he prayed to God many times a day to be delivered from his addiction and that talking to God brought comfort. He quickly adds, however, that he does not pray anymore. In each of his early sessions, Glenn referenced Psalm 66:18, which states, in essence, that God does not hear the prayers of the sinful. Essentially, Glenn discontinued praying out of his belief that he was such a bad person that God would never hear his prayers. This issue appeared to be conflated with his family of origin because his father abandoned the family when Glenn was 5 years old, an event for which Glenn still blamed himself almost 50 years later. Glenn appeared dejected when he spoke of his current spiritual life and disclosed his dissatisfaction in the area, but he remained uncertain about when or how he could make changes. Glenn answered the importance question with a rating of 10, the confidence question with a 3, and the readiness question with a hesitant "Yes, I suppose." The MI counselor conceptualizes Glenn as being ambivalent about change in his spiritual life, with low confidence in his ability to carry out changes.

- *Counselor*: A part of you is afraid that God is mad at you and has stopped listening, but another part of you misses talking to God. (*Highlighting discrepancy*)
- *Glenn*: Oh yeah, I miss it. I used to feel better when I prayed to him, but after my last relapse I knew even God couldn't forgive me again.
- *Counselor*: You used up your last chance and now God doesn't pay attention to you, so why talk to him? (*Reflect one side of ambivalence*)
- *Glenn*: I definitely don't have any more chances, but sometimes I think God is still paying attention. (*Client speaks from the other side of ambivalence*)
- *Counselor*: He hasn't completely given up. (*Counselor reflects this side of ambivalence*)
- *Glenn*: I guess I still hope he hasn't. Every once in a while I think about him and I don't think he hates me. (*Beginnings of change talk*)
- *Counselor*: It's as if God hasn't abandoned you, even though you think he should. (*Reflection*)
- *Glenn*: I mean, *I* would abandon me.
- *Counselor*: Yet somehow God is different.
- *Glenn*: Yeah I guess. It's like, he is in it for the long haul, you know?
- *Counselor*: So let me make sure I've got everything right. You enjoyed talking to God, but your last relapse seemed like it should have been the last straw … it would have been if you were God. Yet it seems as if God still cares and hasn't given up on you. He is still around, in it for the long haul, but you do not talk to him and you miss the communication. (*Summary highlighting discrepancy and change talk*)
- *Glenn*: Yeah, that's about right. I guess I think if I keep talking he'll realize what a screw-up I am and just walk away.

- *Counselor*: You decided to cut it off before he figures it out, but you miss the relationship. (*Double-sided reflection in which counselor attends to both sides of ambivalence*)
- *Glenn*: Yeah, I guess it doesn't make a lot of sense. I am the one not talking and I wish I could. I hate the way things are. I feel lonely without him. (*Client change talk: disadvantages of the status quo*)
- *Counselor*: If you were talking to him again, you would feel connected and not so alone. (*Counselor responds by reframing comment to reflect the advantages of change*)
- *Glenn*: Exactly. I really want that, but I'm not sure I know how to do it. (*Client importance is high but confidence is low*)
- *Counselor*: Let's pretend you figured out how to do it and you made a change, how would things be different? (*Counselor elicits more change talk describing the advantages of change*)
- *Glenn*: Well, I'd have someone to talk to and I could tell him how hard it is to be sober. I would know he understood, because he's God, and that would make me feel better. I wouldn't have to do this all by myself. (*Client identifies several advantages to change*)
- *Counselor*: You would be a team. (*Reflects change talk*)
- *Glenn*: Yeah, like me and God against the alcohol (laugh). Those would be better odds.
- *Counselor*: It seems like you want things to be different between you and God. Earlier when I asked how confident you were that you could make a change, you said a 3. I am curious why you did not choose a 1? (*Using assessment ruler question to build confidence*)
- *Glenn*: Well, I mean, God and I have been close before … and I've done some pretty stupid things in the past but we got through it.
- *Counselor*: Tell me how you were able to do that. (*Reviewing past successes to build confidence*)

By reviewing past successes and identifying relevant personal strengths, Glenn's confidence in his ability to make changes in his spiritual life began to increase. He decided he wanted to make an appointment with his local pastor to talk more about prayer and forgiveness. In subsequent sessions, Glenn reported feeling "more alive" than he had been in a while and continued to emphasize spirituality in his recovery program.

**Ambivalence Around Exploring Facets of the Self**

Jamie is a 21-year-old female college student. She reports that she was raised in a family that valued science and observable evidence above all else, and thus she is currently studying to be a microbiologist. She reports, however, that as she is individuating from her family during college, she is noticing a longing for "something more" and expresses her current wonderings about things that cannot be measured and observed, such as the metaphysical. She reports feeling healthy in most aspects of her life; however, she has begun to wonder if there are facets of life that are greater than what can be understood through science alone. Jamie describes the sensation of being stuck, knowing she wants something more in her life, yet she is uncertain and somewhat fearful about what that might be. She answers the importance question with a score of 5 ("I'm just not sure, but I think so"), the confidence question with a score of 1 ("This is all totally new to me"), and the readiness question with an emphatic "Yes." Although the MI counselor does not

have a particular change outcome in mind, the goal is to resolve Jamie's ambivalence and help her feel less stuck.

- *Counselor*: It sounds like you are at an impasse. (*Expressing empathy*)
- *Jamie*: Exactly. My whole life I've moved in one direction, and now all of the sudden, I am feeling pulled to try a different road.
- *Counselor*: Why don't we try slowing down for a minute and take a look at each road separately, and maybe we can learn a little bit more. Does that sound OK? (*Respecting client autonomy*)
- *Jamie*: Sure. How do we do that?
- *Counselor*: Let's start with staying on the path you've been traveling, the one in which you fully rely on what you can see, measure, and understand through science. What are the advantages of that road? (*Clarifying ambivalence by exploring each side separately*)
- *Jamie*: Well, it's familiar for one thing. I understand it and I trust it to some extent. Science is predictable and measurable.
- *Counselor*: So this path is clear-cut and defined. No surprises. What else?
- *Jamie*: On this road, I am also in good company. My family and close friends all look to science for answers about life and the world. I feel supported on that path.
- *Counselor*: You are part of a like-minded community and feel included. What else?
- *Jamie*: Um … I guess it makes me feel in control. If everything comes down to science, I can learn that … I can conduct a good experiment and find answers … I can solve the puzzles if I choose to. I guess that's all I can think of.
- *Counselor*: OK, great. Now let's think about the other path, the one that has emerged more recently and involves something beyond science. What are the advantages of going down that road? (*Explores the other side of ambivalence*)
- *Jamie*: It seems exciting to me … like it could open up a new part of myself. Since I have never been religious, I have never given any thought to spirituality either … but I have started to wonder about whether or not I could be a spiritual person. It could be a chance to understand myself better.
- *Counselor*: So it would be an adventure of sorts, to learn more about yourself in a spiritual context. What else?
- *Jamie*: Well, there are some answers I am just not satisfied with when I am only considering science.
- *Counselor*: Questions like?
- *Jamie*: You know, big questions … like what am I doing here? What happens when I die? What is the purpose of the human race, and all that. Part of me thinks I may find the answers if I start looking into God, or a Higher Power, or destiny, or something.
- *Counselor*: So this new road may hold answers to questions that have been accumulating along the way.
- *Jamie*: Yeah, I just have a sense there may be something out there bigger than me … bigger than science even. I don't want to miss that.
- *Counselor*: By journeying down this road a bit, you could be a part of something big.
- *Jamie*: Exactly.
- *Counselor*: OK, so let me make sure I've got this right. You feel stuck in the middle of an intersection. One direction is the way you've always known … it's predictable and familiar. You travel this road with like-minded people and it puts you in control—in the

driver's seat, let's say. The other direction is exciting and unknown; it may unlock parts of yourself that you've yet to explore and answer questions you've been carrying for a while. And it may lead to something bigger than yourself. (*Counselor summarizes both sides of the ambivalence issue*) Has anything else come to mind?

- *Jamie*: Well, as you were talking, I was thinking maybe that's why I am afraid of the new road … because if I find something bigger than me, I may not be in the driver's seat anymore.
- *Counselor*: It is scary to think about life with someone or something else in control. (*Express empathy*)
- *Jamie*: Yeah, like what if he, she, or it takes me to a place I don't want to go?
- *Counselor*: If you aren't in the driver's seat, you could get into an accident or take a wrong turn. (*Reflect one side of ambivalence*)
- *Jamie*: Right … but …
- *Counselor*: But?
- *Jamie*: What if I end up in a place better than I expected? What if the new driver has a map I don't even know about? It would be nice to just relax and take in the scenery rather than having to be in charge of everything. (*Client speaks from the other side of ambivalence*) I guess I still don't know what to do!
- *Counselor*: It's hard to be in a place where the direction is unclear, especially since you value predictability. (*Expressing empathy*) I am curious, what else do you value? When you think about your life, what is most important? (*Clarifying values to help resolve ambivalence*)
- *Jamie*: Hmmm … well, you're right, predictability and explanations are really important. And when I don't have answers, I can always conduct an experiment. I guess I really prioritize research and testing … solving the puzzle. (*Identifying values*)
- *Counselor*: Like the puzzle you are in now.
- *Jamie*: Exactly! It's like, this spiritual stuff is a big mystery to me … and I feel like I owe it to myself to test it out and see what happens …
- *Counselor*: An experiment of sorts.
- *Jamie*: Right! It's not like me to leave something unexamined. I want to do some research and find out if this is something that fits for me.
- *Counselor*: In what ways can you do research in this area? Let's generate as many ideas as possible and go from there. (*Begin brainstorming*)

Jamie identifies many ways in which she can begin exploring spirituality. The counselor summarizes her ideas and asks Jamie to select the option that makes the most sense for her. Jamie decides that she would like to begin by gathering more information about spirituality through reading, because this method is most familiar to her. In subsequent sessions, Jamie reports feeling "invigorated" by reading spiritual texts and expresses satisfaction in her process.

**Implications for Practice and Future Research**

MI has the potential to be a useful approach for counselors working with client issues related to spirituality. Because no empirical evidence currently exists to support the efficacy of MI above other theories used to address spirituality, outcome data are needed to determine the effects of applying the approach to spiritual issues. Additionally, in light of previous research indicating

that counselors may be hesitant to address spirituality or religiosity in counseling (Cashwell et al., 2013; Frazier & Hansen, 2009), empirical research is needed to assess the impact of MI training on counselors' willingness to explore client spirituality. Finally, because MI has been used in a variety of forms (Hettema et al., 2005), research assessing the effectiveness of the approach would advance this field when it is used as an independent treatment method with client ambivalence regarding spiritual issues or in conjunction with other approaches to client spirituality.

## Conclusion

Ethical standards such as the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005) and recent competencies such as the ASERVIC Spiritual Competencies (Cashwell & Watts, 2010) attest to the perceived importance of addressing spiritual issues in the counseling process. Beyond perceived importance, however, an identified approach is needed to offer a method for effectively attending to client spirituality. MI seems well suited for this task because the goal of MI is to resolve ambivalence and help clients become unstuck by relying on their intrinsic motivation to change and prioritizing client autonomy. Within this framework, the counselor is not directing the client toward any particular outcome and avoids imposing values. Thus, the spirit of MI, coupled with its principles and associated techniques, makes it a viable and ethical tool for attending to spiritual issues and promoting client development.

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