

# Compassionate approach to interrogation more effective, study shows

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A University of Liverpool research paper, published in *American Psychologist*, provides new evidence for using a humane, respectful and compassionate approach to interrogating High-Value Detainees (HVDs—i.e. terrorist suspects) to encourage co-operation and disclosure of information.

Motivational interviewing (MI) is a counseling method that helps people resolve ambivalent feelings and insecurities to find the internal motivation they need to change their behavior.

Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, two humanistic psychologists, who rejected the approach to therapy that suggested there was something repressed or wrong with the individual that needed a therapist to 'fix', originally developed this style of interviewing.

This alternative approach empowers patients by helping to create an environment in which they have their own autonomy over whether and how they would approach their substance misuse / health related problems.

In clinical contexts, this method is often used to address addiction and the management of physical health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and asthma. This intervention helps people become motivated to change the behaviors that are preventing them from making healthier choices.

## Engagement and information yield

Currently, [law enforcement](#) (LE) interviewers do use skills consistent with four principles of MI (reflective listening, summaries, rolling with resistance and developing discrepancies) and five Global MI strategies relating to MI "spirit" (acceptance, empathy, evocation, adaptation and autonomy) when interviewing HVDs.

However, there has been no clear evidence relating to which specific MI skills and approaches can increase or decrease HVD engagement and information provided.

Researchers from the University's Centre for Critical and Major Incident Psychology, led by Centre Director Professor Laurence Alison, conducted a study to examine the relationship between LE interviewers' use of these four skills consistent with the principles of MI, the five Global MI strategies relating to MI spirit, detainee engagement, and information yield.

The researchers analyzed 804 tapes of law enforcement interviews with 75 terrorism suspects in the U.K using the Observing Rapport Based Techniques (ORBIT) coding Manual.

Professor Alison and his team have worked for over 15 years on the ORBIT approach to interviewing which includes managing difficult behaviors (the interpersonal element) and extracting information (the rapport skills element).

## Reactance, choice and mind set

The researchers found that MI Skills encouraged detainee engagement and subsequent information gain.

It also revealed that any approach antithetical to MI had a profoundly negative impact on detainee engagement and subsequent information gain—through the creation of reactance.

Professor Alison, said: "An interviewer can create resistance when there previously was none i.e. a suspect could be considering talking but when the interviewer states, 'It is in your best interest to talk,' it creates reactance."

"To prevent reactance an interviewer must provide choice and freedom—the freedom to talk or not talk—it is up to the interviewee.

"The more an interviewer pressures an interviewee to talk, the less likely they are to. Personal control and a feeling of autonomy is exactly what a therapist in counseling seeks to create in clients (whether that be substance misuse or health related behaviors) and it should be what interviewers should do with suspects too."

Ph.D. candidate Frances Surmon-Böhr, First author of the study, adds: "The key to success is creating the right mind set for the [interviewer](#) not an 'off the peg' tactic they can deploy. Our research provides unique evidence for the use of specific skills and approaches that can increase or decrease HVD engagement and information provided.

"These findings have potential to improve methods of national security whilst promoting fair treatment of detainees."

**More information:** Frances Surmon-Böhr et al.

The right to silence and the permission to talk: Motivational interviewing and high-value detainees., *American Psychologist* (2020). [DOI: 10.1037/amp0000588](#)

Provided by University of Liverpool

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