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Change Talk Worksheet

Part 1. Details and the change goal

Item	Entry
Clinician	
Reviewer or supervisor	
Session or recording	
Minutes reviewed	
Date of review	

The change goal

Include: the specific change you and the client are discussing, in the client's words. Change talk is always talk about a particular change.

What I want to listen for

Include: the skill or the moment you want to review, such as how you respond when the client argues for keeping things as they are.

Questions for supervision or peer review

Include: moments you want to replay and responses you are unsure about.

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Part 2. A key to change talk and sustain talk

Preparatory change talk is heard while a client weighs a change, and mobilizing change talk as the client moves toward acting on it.

Code	Kind	What you hear	An example about drinking
D	**Desire** Preparatory	Wanting, wishing for or liking the change.	"I want to wake up clearheaded."
A	**Ability** Preparatory	Confidence that the change is possible, in words such as can or could.	"I could keep wine to the weekends."
R	**Reasons** Preparatory	A specific reason for the change, often in an if and then form.	"If I cut back, I'd sleep through the night."
N	**Need** Preparatory	Urgency without a reason given, in words such as have to or need to.	"I need to get my drinking under control."
C	**Commitment** Mobilizing	A promise or a stated intention that the change will happen.	"I'm going to skip wine on weeknights."
Act	**Activation** Mobilizing	Leaning toward action before deciding, in words such as willing or ready.	"I'm ready to try a week without it."
T	**Taking steps** Mobilizing	Something the client has already done toward the change.	"I left the wine off the grocery list."
S	**Sustain talk**	Any of the seven kinds, turned toward keeping things as they are.	"Wine is how I relax, and I don't want to give it up."
Two codes	**Mixed statement**	Change talk and sustain talk in one statement. Code each part.	"I want to cut back, and my evenings feel empty without it." (D and S)

Ways to respond

When you hear	What you can do
To change talk	Ask for more with an open question, affirm it, reflect it and gather it into a summary.
To sustain talk	Reflect it simply, with a little more intensity, or with a double-sided reflection that ends on change talk. You can also emphasize the client's choice, offer another way to see it or come alongside.
To discord	Discord is strain between you and the client. Reflect what the client is telling you, and apologize when the strain comes from something you said.

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Part 3. Statement log

Write each statement about the change in the client's words, code it with the key in Part 2, and write what you said next. Where a stronger response fits, write it in the last column.

#	What the client said	Code	What I said next	A response to try
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				
9				

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Part 3. Statement log, continued

#	What the client said	Code	What I said next	A response to try
10				
11				
12				
13				
14				
15				
16				
17				
18				
19				

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Part 4. The balance and what to practice

Count of each kind

Include: how many statements of each kind you coded in the log.

	Desire	Ability	Reasons	Need	Commitment	Activation	Taking steps	Sustain talk
Times heard								

Change talk and sustain talk in total

Include: the total of each, and how the balance moved from the start of the segment to the end.

Responses that drew out more change talk

Include: the statement numbers, what you said and what the client said next.

Responses that drew out more sustain talk

Include: the statement numbers, what you said and what the client said next.

What I will practice next

Include: one or two responses to practice, and when you will practice them.

How confident I am that I can hear change talk as it happens

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not confident										*Very confident*

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Clinician guide: using the change talk worksheet

- **When it fits.** Use the worksheet to review a role-play, or a session recorded with the client's written consent and your setting's approval, in a skills course, in supervision or in your own practice. Agree on the change goal first, since what counts as change talk depends on the change being discussed (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).
- **Code what you hear.** Miller and Rollnick (2023) call desire, ability, reasons and need preparatory change talk, and commitment, activation and taking steps mobilizing change talk. Each kind has a sustain talk counterpart that favors the status quo. Code each part of a mixed statement on its own.
- **Invite change talk.** Ask open questions whose natural answer is change talk, such as what the client would like to be different, how they could make the change if they decided to, what their best reasons are and how important the change is to them. After a 0 to 10 importance ruler, ask what makes the number as high as it is, since the answer is likely to be change talk (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).
- **Respond to change talk.** Use OARS: ask open questions for more detail or an example, affirm, reflect and gather the change talk into summaries (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).
- **Soften sustain talk and discord.** Reflect sustain talk simply, with more intensity or with a double-sided reflection that starts with the sustain talk and ends on change talk, joined by and. Emphasizing autonomy, reframing and coming alongside can also help, and a reflection or an apology can ease discord in the working relationship (Miller & Rollnick, 2023).
- **Look at the balance.** The balance of change talk and sustain talk predicts how likely change is, and the amount of sustain talk predicts it better than the amount of change talk (Miller & Rollnick, 2023). In a meta-analysis of 36 studies, a higher proportion of change talk went with less risk behavior at follow-up (Magill et al., 2018).
- **Keep safety in view.** When a client speaks of suicide, self-harm, hopelessness or harming someone, attend to the risk first, and follow your setting's crisis protocol whenever a situation involves risk.

Adapted from the descriptions of change talk, sustain talk and responses to each in Miller and Rollnick (2023). The layout and wording are original.

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Completed example: Teresa (a fictional client)

Teresa, 47, is a billing supervisor and a client in an outpatient substance use program. She wants to stop drinking wine on weeknights. Her counselor, D.M., an associate counselor, recorded their third session with Teresa's written consent and reviewed a 12-minute segment with a supervisor, Dr. A.R., on November 19, 2026. Teresa, D.M., Dr. A.R. and every detail of the case are invented.

Part 1. Details and the change goal

Item	Entry
Clinician	D.M., associate counselor
Reviewer or supervisor	Dr. A.R., clinical supervisor
Session or recording	Session 3 with Teresa, recorded with her written consent
Minutes reviewed	18 to 30
Date of review	November 19, 2026

The change goal

No wine on weeknights, Sunday through Thursday. In Teresa's words, "I want my weeknights back."

What I want to listen for

Whether I reflect Teresa's change talk or argue with her reasons for drinking.

Questions for supervision or peer review

What could I have said after statement 2? How do I respond when Teresa says she is willing, before she has a plan?

Part 3. Statement log

#	What the client said	Code	What I said next	A response to try
1	"A couple of glasses is how I wind down after work."	S	"Isn't it affecting your sleep?"	"Wine is how you unwind after a long day."
2	"My sleep is fine. Everyone at work drinks more than I do."	S	"What about waking up at 3 a.m.?"	"It doesn't seem like a big problem to you right now."
3	"I'd like to wake up without a headache."	D	"Do you get headaches often?"	"Clear mornings matter to you. What would they give you?"
4	"My daughter heard me slurring on the phone last week."	R	"What was that like for you?"	Fits as it is.

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#	What the client said	Code	What I said next	A response to try
5	“I have to do something before my physical in January.”	N	“What do you think your doctor will say?”	“Something needs to change, and the physical is part of it. What else makes it important now?”
6	“I could skip Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Thursdays are different.”	A and S	“Thursdays are different.”	“Thursdays feel different, and you could skip Tuesdays and Wednesdays.”
7	“I’m willing to try a whole week of weeknights.”	Act	“Great!”	“You’re ready to try a week. What will help on the hardest nights?”
8	“I already moved the wine out to the garage on Sunday.”	T	“Okay.”	“You’ve already taken a step on your own.”
9	“I will skip wine every weeknight this week.”	C	A summary of her reasons, her step on Sunday and her plan.	Fits as it is.

Part 4. The balance and what to practice

Count of each kind

	Desire	Ability	Reasons	Need	Commitment	Activation	Taking steps	Sustain talk
Times heard	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	3

Change talk and sustain talk in total

Change talk 7, sustain talk 3. The first two statements were sustain talk, and the last three were mobilizing change talk.

Responses that drew out more change talk

My open question about her daughter’s call after statement 4. Teresa went on to what she has to do before her physical.

Responses that drew out more sustain talk

My question about her sleep after statement 1. Teresa said her sleep was fine and compared her drinking with her coworkers’ drinking.

What I will practice next

Reflect sustain talk before I say anything else, and affirm steps Teresa has already taken. I will practice both in role-plays with my peer group on Friday.

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How confident I am that I can hear change talk as it happens

0	1	2	3	4	5	**6**	7	8	9	10
Not confident										*Very confident*

Dr. A.R. and D.M. replayed statements 1 and 2, and D.M. heard how the question about sleep after statement 1 brought more sustain talk. They role-played the responses in the last column, including a double-sided reflection for statement 6 that ends on Teresa's change talk. At the next session, D.M. reflected Teresa's first sustain talk before asking anything else, and asked about her mood, including thoughts of suicide, as part of the usual assessment.

References and further reading

Books for clinicians

Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2023). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change and grow* (4th ed.). Guilford Press. ISBN 978-1-4625-5279-5.

Research

Amrhein, P. C., Miller, W. R., Yahne, C. E., Palmer, M., & Fulcher, L. (2003). Client commitment language during motivational interviewing predicts drug use outcomes. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 71*(5), 862–878.

Magill, M., Apodaca, T. R., Borsari, B., Gaume, J., Hoadley, A., Gordon, R. E. F., Tonigan, J. S., & Moyers, T. (2018). A meta-analysis of motivational interviewing process: Technical, relational, and conditional process models of change. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 86*(2), 140–157.

Magill, M., Gaume, J., Apodaca, T. R., Walthers, J., Mastroleo, N. R., Borsari, B., & Longabaugh, R. (2014). The technical hypothesis of motivational interviewing: A meta-analysis of MI's key causal model. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 82*(6), 973–983.

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