



HOW SHOULD HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONERS ADDRESS COVID-19 VACCINE HESITANCY?

Motivational Interviewing Offers Guidance.

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Vaccine hesitancy describes a delay in the acceptance, or refusal, of vaccines despite availability. Vaccine hesitancy is a top threat to global health given the importance of vaccinations in slowing the transmission of preventable diseases. Recent data from the CDC suggests that about 75% of the U.S. population has received at least one dose of the vaccine (63% fully vaccinated, <40% boosted) as of

January 2022. COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy likely plays a key role in this vaccination gap and is therefore a major public health threat. Practitioners can play a vital role in helping patients navigate vaccine hesitancy.

Motivational interviewing is a research-based approach defined as “a collaborative conversation style for strengthening a person’s own motivation and commitment to change.” It is especially useful for addressing vaccine hesitancy given its focus on listening, recognizing, and helping patients resolve ambivalence about getting the COVID-19 vaccine in an empathic, nonjudgmental, non-confrontational, neutral, and compassionate way. Motivational interviewing is also practical for health care settings due to its brevity and findings that a range of practitioners can successfully implement it across a variety of clinical settings. Motivational interviewing seeks to understand a person’s position and curiously explore ambivalence free from judgment or intent to influence one’s decision which reduces conflict in the clinical encounter. Avoiding the “righting reflex”, which is the impulse and desire to fix, is fundamental to prevent discord in the relationship with the patient.

Practitioners can use motivational interviewing in their patient encounters by engaging in a *three-step process*. First, approach discussions about vaccine hesitancy with neutrality, using open-ended questions, affirmations, reflections, and summaries. This collaborative approach allows the practitioner to develop rapport while emphasizing a patient’s autonomy and expressing a desire to understand their position, rather than change the patient’s mind about the COVID-19 vaccine.

Next, use strategies from the motivational interviewing toolbox to further explore hesitancy. Evocation, for example, often includes asking more targeted, open-ended questions to learn more about the patient’s position.

Finally, respond mindfully and skillfully to the patient’s position. It can be useful to summarize the discussion, highlighting aspects favoring behavior change and collaboratively deciding on a next step for the patient.

Remember that ambivalence may not be resolved in a single interaction. For long term care practitioners, such as family medicine physicians, it is often worth scheduling a follow-up conversation to revisit the conversation later.

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Case example between a practitioner (HCP) and patient (P)

Step 1: Practice a guiding style.

HCP: How do you feel about getting the COVID-19 vaccine?

P: I want to make the right decision, but I don’t feel like I fully understand the risks and benefits.

HCP: You make a strong point that it’s important to be informed about these decisions before choosing which course of action is best for you.

Step 2: Evoke.

HCP: What is your understanding of the COVID-19 vaccine?

P: I know that it was developed very quickly, and we don’t have long-term data.

HCP: You have concerns about long-term consequences.

Would it be alright if I shared some information about how the COVID-19 vaccine was developed?

P: Sure.

HCP: [*briefly provide key information*] What are your thoughts about that information?

P: Well, some of that is new to me....

Step 3: Respond mindfully and skillfully.

HCP: What might be the next step for you related to the vaccine?

P: I think I need to do some of my own research on what we talked about today.

HCP: The evidence is important to you. Would it be alright if I sent you home with some readings on the vaccine and we can schedule another appointment to follow up in a few weeks?