

Episode 23: Affirmations- Simple vs Complex

Lions and Tigers and Bears MI is an interactive podcast focused on motivational interviewing

CASAT Podcast Network.

Lions and Tigers and Bears MI is brought to you through a collaboration between the Mountain Plains ATTC and NFARtec. In episode 23, Paul and Amy welcome a guest to discuss simple versus complex affirmations for episode resources, links to episodes, contact us, and other information, please visit the Lions and Tigers and Bears MI website at mtplainsattc.org/podcast.

Paul Warren: Lions and Tigers and Bears MI is an interactive podcast focused on the evidence based practice of motivational interviewing, a method of communication that guides toward behavior change while honoring autonomy.

Amy Shanahan: I'm Amy Shanahan.

Paul Warren: And I'm Paul Warren.

Amy Shanahan: And we've worked together over the past ten years. We've been facilitating MI learning collaboratives and providing trainings and coaching sessions focused on the adoption and refinement of MI. We're also members of the motivational interviewing network of trainers. Join us in this adventure into the forest, where we

explore and get curious about what lies behind the curtain of MI. Hey, Paul.

Paul Warren: Hello, Amy. How are you today?

Amy Shanahan: Doing well, and you?

Paul Warren: Very good, thank you. Very good. Very excited, as I always say that I am, when we're about to introduce a guest. We're so fortunate to have another guest joining us today.

Amy Shanahan: I'm, glad you said it this time because I say it too well.

Paul Warren: If you're excited, you should say it.

Amy Shanahan: I'm excited.

We welcome motivational interviewing expert Jen Manuel to the podcast

Paul Warren: All right, so since we're both excited, let's take a moment to welcome Jen Manuel to the podcast and give her an opportunity to introduce herself before we reveal the topic for our conversation today. Hello, Jen.

Jen Manuel: Hi. Thanks so much for having me here today.

Amy Shanahan: Thanks for joining us.

Paul Warren: We're delighted you're here. Thank you so much for joining us.

Jen Manuel: So I will just give a brief intro. So I calling, in from San Francisco, California. I work at the San Francisco VA Medical Center and I'm also associate professor at university, of California, San Francisco. I'm a psychologist by training and have been, working with motivational interviewing since 2001, I think so. Quite a long time at this point.

Jen Manuel: I'm also excited to be here with both of you.

Paul Warren: Well, go ahead, Amy.

Amy Shanahan: We're just stepping all over. No, I was just going to say that, I'm not going to speak for Paul. I, learned so much from you the first time I ever met you at a forum, and you taught me around the motivational interviewing, treatment integrity scale. So the coding scale that we talked about several episodes ago, and I often repeat a lot of the things that you've shared and the nuances of things and it was just such a rich experience for me. And it feels like having a rock star here in the podcast, because I also know, and maybe you're being humble, that you've authored so many things around motivational interviewing, including the mighty, scales. So just wanted to put a plug in, Jen, for your authorship of several probably books and articles in your tenure with mi m and other things. So thank you so much again. Go ahead, Paul. I'm sorry.

Paul Warren: No, Feels like having a rock star. We have a rock star with us today, so. Yes. And you know, Amy, your, affirmation of Jen's career really is kind of the entree into the topic that we're going to discuss today. And this is, I think, a topic of particular

interest because there is a movement to create greater distinction between simple affirmations and complex affirmations, just like we have simple reflections and complex reflections. So we're delighted to have Jen here to take this new way of thinking. And it's probably not really a new way, it's an evolved way of thinking about affirmations. And

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Paul Warren: as we jump into this topic, I had mentioned earlier that I wanted to pose a question to both of you, and that question is simply this. I have often heard, and I don't know if you share this perspective or not, but I have often heard of the four core micro skills OARS that affirmations are the least used of these four skills. And I'm wondering of open ended questions, affirmations, reflections or summaries. And I'm wondering if the two of you have also heard that, or if that's an urban legend, or if you have any insider thoughts as to why affirmations might be the least used of the core micro skills, the core communication skills.

Jen Manuel: It's a great question. I haven't heard, I don't know data on this. I haven't heard from others that it's the least used skills. Certainly that's true. For me. I would say that, affirmations, they're something actually I've built up over time. And, we always learn so much with the people we train with, and I train with someone who does a lot around affirmations. And so I've picked up more and I've utilized them more in, my clinical work than I did in the past. And so it fits for me what you're just saying there.

Amy Shanahan: Yeah, it might be, a legend or a myth that we think that that's. So I could say that from my experience, when I coach with people. My own experience of using the skills, like you, Jen, I don't hear the use or I don't code affirmations as much as others, as the other three, the other, the rest of the street, the four skills, I have, seen

them used strategically after coaching people and see how it pivots the relationship. but I guess my hunch about the why, maybe from my experience and my background, as many may have heard and know, is predominantly in substance use disorder care. And I don't know that it's unique to that level of treatment, but really just a problem focused perspective and finding the problem and solving it and creating a diagnosis and fixing that, that and the strengths and values of a person and their efforts being made weren't really a primary thing that we focused on in practice and in training in other ways outside of motivational interviewing.

Amy Shanahan: What about you?

Paul Warren: Well, go ahead, Jen, you were going to say something. Go ahead.

Jen Manuel: Well, and I just think it also makes sense, like, so if we're going to quantify, you know, if you're talking about coding and we're going to quantify, you know, different types of speech, you know, I would expect that there would be less affirmations because I think a session in which there was like an equal number of reflections and affirmations might be weird, right? So, and it would be, I think, very driven by the clinician and much less about, you know, the client or patient with whom the person's interacting with. And so it also, like, I think affirmations are something for us all to be thinking about. But I think it would be, and I can imagine sessions, of course, where that would make sense, but overall I would expect that they would be used much less than other behavior codes.

Paul Warren: As you said that, Jen, and the way you said it, a light bulb really went off for me. And again, this is radio, so you can't see my face. But a light bulb really did go off for me because it made me think about the purpose or the intention behind the

offering of an affirmation. And it's funny because I think this evolution of simple and complex affirmations really gives us an opportunity to think more deeply about the purpose of the use of an affirmation. And I have to say for myself, and I'm curious as to what your thoughts are about this. For myself, the true purpose of an affirmation for me when I offer it, is portability. And what I mean by portability is that when I reflect that effort or I reflect that intrinsic strength. Intrinsic strength as a form of affirmation. My hope is that that person is going to be able to walk away with that and use that in the efforts of their change process, or at least be able to carry it with them as a strength that they know that they have. And to me, am I consistent? Affirmations

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Paul Warren: are about doing that as opposed to offering praise or validation.

Jen Manuel: I'm nodding. You can't see me. I'm agreeing. I mean, I think that the, and I think that actually what I often do is coach people not to have the praise. So, you know, an affirmation, if we're going to define it, really shouldn't have I in there, right? So we want to leave that out. And so if you're noticing that, you know, someone's made a lot of changes, rather than saying, I'm so proud of you, you've made a lot of changes lately, or I've noticed you've made a lot of changes lately, just kind of saying, like, you've made a lot of changes, like, you're really taking action. And that last one is really much more focused on the client than it is on me as the clinician. and what I think, and so that's the piece, I think, where there's some hesitancy among clinicians and providers is, you know, we also want to, we want to recognize what someone's doing well and create space for them to talk to us when things aren't going so well. So if we praise all the changes someone makes, are they going to feel like they can come back to us and say, actually, like I started using again or, whatever the behavior is. And so it's just holding

both of those at the same time.

Paul Warren: I'm so glad you said that, and you said it the way you did, because I have, many times in trainings, participants have said, oh, well, I tell my clients consistently that I'm proud of them, and we, and it's a wonderful learning opportunity within the context of the training because we get to talk about the client becoming dependent upon them, the client feeling, reticent to come back for another session if indeed things haven't gone the way they were, quote unquote, supposed to be going. And, yeah. And it is the balance between how you can offer that affirmation with the start, you have made a lot of progress, and then that way, the person can own it for themselves.

Amy Shanahan: To me, what you said, Jen, really is so helpful, and it comes up a lot when I'm talking with other folks about not starting with I as well. And it connected to me, with me, Paul, about your word, your use of portability, that because if they walk away, they're not dependent on us to then repeat that. Or, like you said, Jen, if they didn't do something towards their goal, they'd be open to come back and talk about it. It doesn't mean that their strength or their skill or their efforts have, diminished because of it. And it's not about our opinion. We noticed what they've done. We've noticed what they've tried.

Jen Manuel: Yeah. And I think, I, mean, I agree with everything you said about the portability. I also think we know self efficacy predicts outcomes. Right. And so the behaviors where Mi is most appropriate are really hard behaviors. Right. So I do a lot of work around smoking. I think about how many times someone who smokes has been told to quit smoking, been shamed for it, finger wagged to some extent, and probably tried and been unsuccessful. And I think a lot of the conversations often. So if we take that example of someone who quit smoking for maybe two or three months and is

reporting back, like, I quit for two or three months and I slipped and I started smoking again, most often, the discussion starts with, like, what happened? Why did you start smoking again? Which is going to elicit shame, right? Like, that's the transition point where someone, you know, went in the other direction of, which they intended originally. So that's a moment where I really like to affirm, like, you did it, right? Like, you. You quit for two to three months. Like, what was that? Like, you know, and elicit sitting the change talk around it, but also talking about, like, what the successes were and what worked for them. And so just even that switch, you know, can. Can make a huge difference for someone. So rather than leaving, like, yeah, I hung out at a bar, and of course I knew I was going to, you know, and that's going to make them kind of feel not great. they're kind of going back to the moments where they were doing it right and recognizing the change there.

Paul Warren: And, you know, as you put it that way, Jen, it really draws a very distinct line between sustained talk and change talk. Because if. If we're inviting the person and guiding the person to focus on, like, where the. Where the slip up happened, what we're basically saying is, walk us. Give us the language related to this, the resumption of the behavior, as opposed to verbally reinforcing when it worked, what it was like, what made that possible? So.

Using affirmations instead of praise can help prevent relapse prevention, psychologist says

Absolutely, yeah.

Amy Shanahan: Beautiful. Reminds me of the work that we've done historically in,

quote, finger quotes,

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Amy Shanahan: that you can't see relapse prevention or people returning to use that. When they come back in, the first thing we do is dissect what happened, what went wrong, like you said, not that I have to repeat all that, but what a nice reframe from, a practitioner perspective to nothing. It doesn't even feel good from a practitioner perspective to dissect what you did wrong, like I'm your parent or like I'm, chastising you. It's, it just doesn't feel good.

Paul Warren: I'm glad you mentioned parent because I think the other thing about using affirmations as opposed to offering praise is that we can maintain our role as a collaborative partner as opposed to a conditional parent. Like, I will, I will, I'm open to talking to you. I'm going to be happy to see you as long as you're following through. And, I mean, no worker would I think, directly or intentionally say that. And yet they communicate that through the use of their praise.

Amy Shanahan: Yeah.

Paul Warren: And affirmations avoid that because we remain in the role of a collaborative partner through offering the affirmation and a collaborative partner that they're not necessarily dependent upon.

Jen Manuel: Yeah, I agree.

Amy Shanahan: What are some things that you do, Jen and Paul, to help providers

move away from cheerleading? I hear a lot myself, and I certainly do it myself. Wow, that's a great idea. Or awesome. And I use these words that are cheerleady. That's a word. And it's habitual. And what are some things that you would tell the listeners or what you've done to help other people consider on, kind of breaking that habit and focusing more on a stronger affirmation?

Jen Manuel: Well, that's the distinction between simple and complex affirmations and that simple or often more general kind of appreciations, encouragement, where the complex affirmations are going to be deeper and often change focused. any affirmation I think should really be specific. So I think, great job. How often have we heard that? So what was great about it? So what is the person leaving with thinking they need to do again next time? And so, you know, and I think, again, I work at the VA. I work with, like, you know, a lot of older adults, males who can, you know, they'll bat, those, reflect those affirmations away. Right. So if they're not specific, they'll say, oh, that's not a big deal. Right. Like, that's. Everybody does that. And so I think that focusing more on, like, what are you really trying to recognize? What are the abilities, the characteristics, you know, that. That you're, wanting to reinforce here, and how do we still do that in a way that's very person centered and not about us?

Paul Warren: I would agree with everything that Jen said. And the other piece that really jumps out to me is, as you were asking that question, Amy, I was thinking, wow. There is the textbook distinction between simple affirmations and complex affirmations. And similar to simple reflections and complex reflections, the deeper the affirmation, the more meaningful or the more resonant it can potentially be for the individual. And I go back to Jen's word because I think it's a word that I try and help the learners that I have the opportunity to work with, to consider and try on is the specificity. And it's almost when giving feedback, because if we're giving feedback, of course, even if we're not

practicing mi. But if we're giving feedback, the more specific the feedback is, the more supportive, the more meaningful it can actually be to the individual. So again, I, think this evolution in the distinction between simple and complex affirmations is a wonderful opportunity for all of us to be more specific and more intentional about what is it that we are trying to do with offering an affirmation and affirmations, the use of affirmations are in addition to what, the specificity of what said, it's the timing of when it's offered, and it's the frequency or the quantity of when it's offered as well.

Amy Shanahan: And definitely the genuineness of it.

Jen Manuel: Yes.

Amy Shanahan: That we're not saying it just to say it.

Paul Warren: Correct. Yeah.

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Paul Warren: And that is, And again, I think that's where the complex affirmations can be so helpful, because perhaps, I'm going out on a limb saying this, but brag me back if I am. It is probably not possible to offer a complex affirmation unless you are deeply attending to the language and the, presentation of the patient or the client sitting across from you, because you have to understand what they're telling you or what's going on for them. in order to actually formulate a complex affirmation, have I gone too far, do you think, or do you think that that's a fair statement?

Jen Manuel: Yeah, I think you have to be listening and following to be able to pick up on

what you want to reinforce. I mean, I think the other piece around affirmations that I think is important to highlight is just that. Denise Ernst who I collaborate closely with always talks. She'll say, like the icing on the cake. Like, too much icing and it's too sweet, doesn't taste good. Right. And so I think about that with affirmations, you know, that too many. And actually in the mighty, when we're coding affirmations, there's like a three strikes rule that if you use the same, affirmation three times, which sometimes we hear like, oh, you work really hard. You work really. And that's just like, why, why are we still saying that?

Amy Shanahan: Right.

Jen Manuel: and so, for the clinician to go deeper and think about, like, what am I really trying to recognize here?

Paul Warren: Yes. Yeah.

Amy Shanahan: And I'm thinking of being new in the practice of motivational interviewing. When I did, sometimes I hear people say, I'm in my head a lot. So I'm intentionally in my head trying to think, well, what should I say now? Oh, they just did something good. So I'm going to offer an affirmation. So, I'm, not disagreeing that it takes some effort to go deeper. And I think that when people are learning and practicing and are thinking in their head, it might sound or come across as I'm just practicing saying it because I know that it's something I should do or, it's a timing for it. So I think when folks are learning and trying to do it, sometimes it may come across disingenuous because they're just doing it to make that effort to do it. If that makes sense.

Paul Warren: It does. It makes sense to me in the sense that what you're saying is that

as people practice the use of affirmations that you can really grow into a deeper attending or following so that you can more. So at first, it may be a little bit more mechanical and may not have the depth or the timing. And the worker, the person practicing mi is making the effort. You know, they're making the connection, the person is expressing an effort. I'm sensing a, strength that this person has. And now's the time to ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. Now's the time to do the affirmation. And as one lives with the practice of mi m and continues to practice mi, you start to make a strategic and intentional decisions about when, how often, what depth at any given moment. It's less, well, I'm going to use this word, and I'm specifically using this word because jen is with us. it is less reactive and more deliberate.

Jen Manuel: A deliberate practice?

Paul Warren: Yes, it's a deliberate practice. Yeah.

Jen Manuel: Well, I think that's a nice transition because I think that affirmations are hard too, right? And so I think they take, like I was thinking as you were talking about, there's almost a certain amount of professional maturity that comes along with offering affirmations in a genuine and specific way. certainly they were not this first skill I, honed as an mi clinician, you know, nor would I think that that's the most important. Right. Like, if you're learning mi, I would start with, like, reflections, open questions, like, add those affirmations in later, as you feel more confident in your practice. But like anything in mi m I think, you know, the deliberate practice reference is like, we have to practice them over and over, right. And be able to generate them. Because in mi, we are kind of thinking along two lines. Like, what am I going to say next? And how does that statement get me to where I want to be going?

Paul Warren: And, you know, as you said that, Jen, it really made me go back to the
earn cake in the sense that, you know, a cake can taste really good even if there's no
icing on it. And it can be really satisfying. And that professional maturity, and I'll even
frame it maybe a slightly different way

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Paul Warren: that practice experience that evolves into that professional maturity is then
when, ah, now I can add, and sometimes, you know, with the pastry bag, you know, too
m much comes out. And, you know, the next cake, hopefully it's a thinner, you know,
more less, you know, a more artful, deliberate use of it.

Jen Manuel: And affirmations don't have to be super fancy, right? Like, they just, like,
that's. I think the, trepidation that some people feel is like, you know, I have to get this
perfect. And it has to be very elaborate. Like, often they can be, you know, pretty
concise and just recognizing, you know, you know, something that someone's doing.
And it always feels good to receive those too. Right. I mean, for me, I mean, I will say
also that some people don't like receiving affirmations, right. So we have to be kind of
paying attention to, you know, how they're landing because there's going to be
differences there.

Amy Shanahan: Yeah, we talk about that with anything. We're talking with people using
mi m, with people watching how they're responding. That's your real feedback. And if
they cringe or they move back, they're not really comfortable with it. That tells us
something. I'm curious, when I'm practicing MI now, certainly simple reflections are not
bad. And we use simple reflections for good intentions and at times, and I wonder if it's
similar when we think about simple affirmations versus complex affirmations, is it more

important to focus on practicing more complex affirmations?

Jen Manuel: I think, curious Paul and Amy, what you both think. my thought is, if you only have simple reflections, you're kind of going around in a circle, right? You're not. And I think that the same is true for simple affirmations. Probably you're not getting the leverage that you might get from complex affirmations. There's nothing wrong with them. But if you're really trying to deepen where someone's going, that's, I think, where the complex affirmations are going to be more suitable. So I think it's kind of like the overall context. I think, you know, starting off with some simple affirmations isn't, isn't bad, but it's just, it's going to be more limited in what you're going to get from it.

Jen: Effective complex affirmations do not have to be overly elaborate or fancy

Paul Warren: You know, before I comment on your question, Amy, I just want to go back to something that Jen said because it's related to this, which is, you know, Jen, when you made the observation that affirmations don't have to be complex. Again, I'm so happy to hear you say that because I think people think, am I over all can be like deeply complex. And, you know, I remember Steve Rollnick, telling us during a conversation that Amy and I and some other people had with him, he was like, you know, I was getting in the way of my own practice by trying to be too clever.

Jen Manuel: Yeah.

Paul Warren: And, I would hope that people will walk away, at least if with only from one thing, from this conversation, but that they walk away that like mi m is, it is an art of

practice and it's not meant to be over intellectualized or overly cumbersome. And sometimes brevity is the soul of the communication. So I really appreciate that being underlined, that effective complex affirmations do not have to be overly elaborate or fancy. They can be very succinct, direct and insightful. And Amy, to your point, I just think that, Could you repeat your point again, Amy?

Amy Shanahan: It was like five minutes ago.

Paul Warren: I think Amy just told me I was talking too long.

Amy Shanahan: But anyway, never. That would be me calling the kettle black. Come on. No, I just asked about, is it a parallel to simple versus, complex reflections and simple versus complex affirmations from do we want to, practice intentionally, the complex affirmations, like we would.

Paul Warren: Reflections thank you for taking me back there. I would just say that, you know, I think that's a very tough question to answer, and I love Jen's answer because it's sort of like, well, you know, if you only stick with the simple ones, it's kind of going to be, like, this circular. And I agree with that. what I would add to what Jen is saying is that people crave for there to be a script for mi, and there is not

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Paul Warren: one. What you say depends on what the client or the patient said before you. You kind of can't plan or script out what you're going to say next. You have to hear what they say, and you have to hear how they said it, and then you can determine. So you, know, a moment, the most appropriate thing may be a simple affirmation or simple

reflection. But again, I think to Jen's point, a singular diet of just simplicity is not going to help you. And I like Jen's word there. It's not going to help you to leverage the potential power that you can maximize out of the conversation.

Amy Shanahan: Yeah.

Jen Manuel: Can I add one thing that I think it's often confused. So there's affirmation and then there's support. And I'm just going back to what you were saying, Amy, earlier about being cheerleader. Kamala Venner was my supervisor in grad school, and she's amazing supervisor. And she would talk to me about, like, wanting to rescue patients. Right. So when someone was saying, like, look, I really messed up. Like, there's a story always about, you know, the person who realized they should quit smoking when they, like, left their kids out in the rain because they went to buy another pack of cigarettes, picking them up from the library, you know? and so that scenario, like, that was the moment where this person was like, gosh, I left my kids out in the rain. Cause I was needed cigarettes, right? And, like, how that was that, that key, like, I need to do something different. Had they been talking to someone who was like, oh, but, you know, you're such a great dad in so many other ways. Right. And an affirmation in that moment detracts actually, from the movement towards change. Right? And so, like, there's. So this is where I think they can get confused. And I think that as all of us in our different professions get into this because we want to be helpers, right. But in the moment, sometimes helping is not jumping in, because, again, in that scenario, it was good for that person to kind of sit with, I am not the father I want to be. And, you know, so that is not where I would want to affirm, someone.

Paul Warren: Love, love.

Jen Manuel: I wish you all could see Paul because he's like, I know he's jumping.

Amy Shanahan: Up and down on his chair.

Paul Warren: I just, I just have to say, I love, I love, love that example. And I really want, I hope that everybody else who's listening to this loves, loves, loves that example, too, because people often have confusion that they think m mi is about making people feel good all the time. And sometimes, and Jen, I love that example, because sometimes that father needs to sit with, or that person, that parent caregiver needs to sit with that in order to let that do its work to help them move forward in their process. So that would be like, like, if we were listening to a recording and somebody did that and we were giving them feedback, we might be able to help them to reflect on, like, how you de powered this person's motivation by poor timing of offering an affirmation because you felt uncomfortable with their reflection on failure.

Jen Manuel: Right. The reflection there is, you want to be a better parent, right. Or caregiver. Like, that's where you want to move it. And I think it can be hard, to sit. Like it's the pit in someone's stomach, right? Like, that's what motivates people to make those changes. And it's hard to sit with that, right. But that's, that's what, that's our job, right? That's what we need to be doing.

Amy Shanahan: You know, it connects to the fixing reflex. If my intention is to affirm someone, oh, don't worry about it. You're, you're a good dad. That's more of a fixing reflex response, even if it's phrased in an affirmation. Like, if I didn't say good job, right, or whatever. Oh, I think that could be the intention that it's my desire to want to fix or. Oh, don't worry, Paul, you're fine. yeah, it could be a fixing reflex response, and I'm a human being.

Paul Warren: We don't want people to feel bad, and we don't want to interrupt the agents of their change either. And that is difficult to sit with sometimes.

Amy Shanahan: We talk a lot about, in our trainings and in these episodes about our intention, and what's our intention in that moment. So that's why I think it's hard to put a script on it all because there's not a right way to say, this is how you do it. I was going to start saying that there's, you know, we can't say this is when you do it. I remember coaching a woman who,

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Amy Shanahan: in supervision, she was really frustrated because she couldn't have, and she couldn't move the conversation that it was all stuck in complaining and things of that nature, not to get into details. And, we just explored, well, what's missing? What haven't you done? What do you think you might do next? And she said, well, there's a lot of things that are going right and she doesn't see it and things that she does that she doesn't see. And I said, well, what, what would you want to say to her to let her see that? So she pointed out that she didn't use affirmations much at all because her issue was that she was frustrated alongside the woman and was getting stuck with her. So she had an intention to highlight her strengths and highlight not necessarily just her strengths, but things that she valued, because this woman was really spinning her wheels in the muck of negativity and that transitioned her movement with the woman. So I don't know, it's just a general example of how she realized there was a lack of self efficacy and a lack of reflecting back on some of that.

Jen Manuel: Well, it's so much easier to pay attention to the negative. This is why we don't use the sandwich for feedback anymore, because when people, they dismiss the

positive waiting for the negative, and then they don't hear the other positive. So it's, you know, I think that it's, it's so much easier. And that's why when we talked about, like, you know, the, this, the return to smoking or whatever it can be, it's so easy to view that as a failure. I can never do this again. But to really highlight the success there is just the same situation. Ah, just a different way of looking at it.

Paul Warren: You know, we have a scenario like we had a. The last time, we did an episode, and we're going to get to the scenario in a minute. And I'm wondering as maybe a transition into the scenario, and we're going to read through the scenario and then we're going to reflect on it a bit. I'm wondering, though, maybe kind of a transition into the scenario might be a little bit of talk, or reflection on if we were going to characterize what the purpose of using affirmations is and what they can actually add by using them, and again, using them appropriately, well timed, not overly. but your thoughts about how you would quantify what the purpose, because they are distinguished from reflections. And, you know, I always think an affirmation is kind of a kind of reflection. but it's not. It doesn't fall under the umbrella of reflections. It's. It's a separate tool. Identified as a separate tool. So I'm curious as to your thoughts about the purpose.

Jen Manuel: I, mean, I think there's multiple purposes I think about. So one is, you know, really, sometimes I try and use affirmations to set the tone that I want this interaction to be different than perhaps other interactions that the patient may have had with other individuals. Again, kind of using this smoking example of, they may have had a lot of not great conversations with healthcare providers. And so, that's part of it, I think, you know, they can be used to, you reinforce the behaviors you want to see again. Right. So, kind of recognizing strengths and steps towards change, wanting to reinforce those and affirm them. The other piece is, I have a grant looking at mi for

Covid vaccination. And so sometimes thinking about the affirmation or reflection, before I give or give different information. Right. And so an example there is sometimes people are like, I've read lots about this, and I, you know, and they have lots of, you know, misinformation around vaccine safety. And so rather than immediately jumping in and saying, like, that's wrong, right. Which can be, the instinct is to say, like, you've really looked into this, right? Like, this has been really important for you to investigate, like, what's going on, you know, and then kind of like, the. Am I adherence, you know, or am I, you know, asking permission? Is it okay if I share different information with you or other information and then giving that. So just kind of, as it makes that information less threatening. And so I think there's lots of purposes. I think it's also just great for therapeutic alliance. Right? Like, it's nice to, again, recognize life is hard, therapy's hard, like, you know, and to call out those moments, I think are really important. And I just. The other piece, I'll say is, like, the other, The more I started using affirmations

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Jen Manuel: clinically, the more I started using them in my life. And I noticed kind of differences in people I work with and others just like that. People do like to be recognized for things that they're doing. And I think then it makes delivering bad news easier when they can say, like, oh, so and so thinks really highly of me. They've said all these things. They want me to do this differently. But I know they think really highly of me. It should be an aunt and they think really highly of me.

Amy Shanahan: It's interesting because I was just, that it just popped into my head somewhere along my travels in grad school. it was around teachers praising students. When you said what you said and I don't know if this is accurate and I probably have to check my facts, it was an old seventies data I think around how teachers praised

students. So I know that praising isn't necessarily affirmations, but if we wanted to insert the word affirmation they were talking about, it takes four phrase to one criticism to stabilize a behavior. And what they noticed was happening was the flip that there was one praise to four criticisms with teacher to students and I don't remember what age level. And then they noticed that it took eight to one. Eight praise to one criticism for any behavior change in students. I don't know why I remember the data. Probably because it's easy and I don't remember the citation, but I will look it up, see if I can find it in my studies. But whatever you were saying, Jen, about like taking it into your, your work life or your personal life and with your colleagues, popped into my head about the ratio of, I never thought about that in my mi travels.

Paul Warren: You know, you didn't put it this way, Jen, but you said it. And Amy, you're alluding to this, is that, that affirmations actually have the capacity to build rapport, that they can actually strengthen that therapeutic alliance, they can actually foster trust in a relationship. And the other, the other piece that I'm really taking away in terms of both of your thoughts about this is that they are a way to communicate that this is, this is not necessarily going to fulfill your expectations of how you've been talked to before. because we are going to be, we're going to be talking with each other in a different way than maybe you've been talked at or talked to in prior conversations. So again, that all comes back to me to rapport and I said this earlier. one of the things that I love about when I am effective at using affirmations is that I've offered it in a way that it's not attached to me. I'm just the reflector of that strength or that effort and then that person gets to take it away with them. So that's, I just felt that it might be helpful to kind of put that on the table as an intro into this particular scenario that we.

Amy Shanahan: May do, you know, another thing to add. It's one thing that we have a habit of looking at problems and helping find the solutions and problem focused. I think

that the people coming to find help also have some expectation that that's what we're going to do, or they're already in their own heads thinking, well, this is bad, I'm bad. I didn't do well. And they're expecting us to come alongside that and agree with them. and maybe not necessarily always expecting that we're going to highlight their strengths and their efforts.

Paul Warren: Yeah. So it can. And to Jen's earlier point, and I think, Amy, you touched on this as well, affirmations are received differently by different people, and we have to see how they land and be paying attention to how they land so that we can gauge how to proceed from that particular place. Because I, could imagine, and I think I've even experienced this, I can't recall a specific specific moment, but I have a general recollection of that offering an affirmation, a complex affirmation. I recall it bringing up a great deal of affect for someone, and again, letting them sit with that to have its resonance

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Paul Warren: and being very clear about how I'm going to proceed forward. We don't want to just assume, oh, it's an affirmation, therefore they're going to love it, because that may not be the case. I don't think we can ever take that for granted. We want to be deliberate and intentional about anything that we're offering and always paying attention to how it lands.

Amy Shanahan: And I'm wondering if this would be a good time for us to shift into the role play and invite listeners to listen in for we have Aubrey and Jeremiah, played by Amy and Paul. I don't know why we're making up names, but we're playing because we're doing a role play. It's not about us. And interestingly, it has something to do with

smoking. invite listeners to listen in and even think about what if you were in Jeremiah's shoes or seat and you are hearing what you are hearing, how do you feel? Or how might you react? Who knows? Well, think about it. We'll talk about it. And, after we get into it.

Paul Warren: And I'll add one other element that you can consider, too, because, based on what Amy just said, the setup is that you can really be thinking about it is how might what the worker is saying land on you if you were the patient or the client. And we also developed the scenario, and we're going to debrief about it a little bit afterward, but we also want you to be able to look at what the worker is doing and evaluate what you think about what the worker is doing and how attentive the worker is in their language and all of that. So the scenario can really be used in both sides. That patient perspective if you were in that role, and the worker perspective in terms of your use of, motivational interviewing and specifically in terms of this particular episode, simple and complex affirmations. I'm ready whenever you are, Amy. Yeah.

Amy Shanahan: All right, well, I'm going to shift roles, and I'm now Aubrey, and I'll start. So. Hello, Jeremiah. Thanks for coming in to talk with me. What's been on your mind?

Paul Warren: Well, you, know, I've been worried about my vaping. I started when I stopped smoking cigarettes, thinking it'd be a good way to wean off, but now I am hearing all these things about how bad it is.

Amy Shanahan: Youve already made some changes to your smoking and now youre considering what to do about vaping.

Paul Warren: I noticed Im feeling more anxious and I wonder if its because Im vaping

too much or reading too much. Im not really sure.

Amy Shanahan: And youd like to figure out whats what so you can make the right decision.

Paul Warren: Vaping helps me relax and reduce my cravings for cigarettes. But now that im reading about what I might be taking in and what it does to my brain, I'm all confused.

Amy Shanahan: And what you've read has got you a little scared and you're here to try to sort it out, right?

Paul Warren: I'm worried if I stop cold turkey that I'll wind up smoking cigarettes again.

Amy Shanahan: And you don't want to go back. Your health is important to you, of course.

Paul Warren: And the older I get, the harder it is to be healthy, it seems.

Amy Shanahan: And when you think about making a change, Jeremiah, I'm wondering what things are you considering?

Paul Warren: Well, I'm taking a vacation this fall and thought I could not take my vape with me. I can't use it on the plane and I thought it might give me a jumpstart. I think about reducing the times I vape and maybe doing something different when I'm tempted to vape, like walking, getting out of the space I'm in.

Amy Shanahan: You've considered quite a few things and you're determined to figure out what's the best way to make this change.

Paul Warren: Putting it off until vacation sounds kind of dumb. So maybe doing some things to distract me from vaping could happen sooner.

Amy Shanahan: What kind of things do you think would be helpful.

Paul Warren: Getting up, walking away from the space I'm in. Sounds like a good distraction. Like they suggest when quitting smoking, eating a piece of candy might be something I could do. I think I would have to put my mind to it because I seem to vape without thinking about it.

Amy Shanahan: And you notice that vaping without thinking about it. And your goal is to vape less. So being more aware of it when you vape is one thing you'd consider.

Paul Warren: It would be a good place to start.

Amy Shanahan: I'm curious, when you transitioned from cigarettes to vaping, what helped you get started there?

Paul Warren: When I was well on my cigarettes, I decided to buy vape instead. It seemed like an easy shift. Although

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Paul Warren: there were times when I wished I'd bought the cigarettes, vaping wasn't

as enjoyable at first.

Amy Shanahan: So when you put your mind to something, you really make it happen.

Paul Warren: I've been told that before. I guess that's right. It doesn't seem that way this time. Because I'm here asking for your help.

Amy Shanahan: Yeah. And that, that takes, takes courage. And asking for help is sometimes the same for some, the process that people need. And you're courageous when it comes to reaching your goals and you ask for help when you want it or need it.

Paul Warren: Yeah, that makes sense. I was a bit nervous coming here, and now I feel some level of relief, like I've made a commitment.

Amy Shanahan: You did make a commitment. And you followed through by coming in to talk about your options. So what do you think you might do next?

Paul Warren: Well, it feels good to talk about it. And thinking about reducing the number of times I ate seems like something I could do. That way I'm doing something and don't have to fear the withdrawal.

Amy Shanahan: So cutting down will give you a peace of mind to reduce that discomfort and stick with your commitment to do something.

Paul Warren: Yes. And when I hear you say it, it seems silly that I couldn't figure that out on my own.

Amy Shanahan: You had a lot on your mind and talking it out helped you sort through what was already there.

Paul Warren: True. I think I'd like to plan to reduce the amount and come back and talk to you again because this was helpful and I think it will keep me accountable.

Amy Shanahan: Yeah, I'm, here to support your plan. What else would you find helpful?

Paul Warren: Well, you know, seeing as I've been vaping without thinking, I first have to pay attention to how much I'm actually vaping before I could even know that I'm making progress cutting down without any data. I'm thinking if I start with reducing by 25%. I'll know what that means after I see how many times I vape a day or how much I buy.

Amy Shanahan: Yeah, that makes sense. Knowing how much you use and then having a baseline to know what 25% means. What else?

Paul Warren: Maybe telling my friend at work he's been noticing how often I'm smoking up the place. You know, it never dawned. It never dawned on me that this was his playful way of telling me it bothers him.

Amy Shanahan: And you care about your friend. And maybe getting his support might even be a relief to him.

Paul Warren: I'm sure he'd be happy to know I'm going to make a change.

Amy Shanahan: That sounds like a good next step. Jeremiah. Maybe we could connect in a couple weeks and see if that sounds good to you. Check in to see how things are

going.

Paul Warren: Two weeks will be good. Thanks.

Amy and Paul use role play to help people make positive change

Amy Shanahan: All right, timeout. Amy and Paul are back.

Paul Warren: As well as Jen.

Amy Shanahan: Jen. Still here, still here, still here.

Paul Warren: Patiently waiting.

Amy Shanahan: M I guess where I'm curious about starting, I mean, we know that role plays, you can feel it a little bit. And I'm wondering, Paul as Jeremiah, what was that like for you? I mean, when you're hearing the affirmations that were in there, what did you notice?

Paul Warren: Well, it's interesting because I have to say, before hearing the affirmations, I want to comment on the fact that I really appreciated that the worker never told me what to do.

Paul Warren: And that it was really, I felt like I had the opportunity to kind of think through this and even to express my discomfort about like, well, gosh, why didn't I figure this out on my own? because I think that that may be a common reaction that people

have. Like, well, you know, it seems so simple, why didn't I think of, well, you actually helped me think of it because I was having a conversation about it and I want to underline that. I felt like you let me lead the conversation and the affirmations that you offered, and there were several of them, helped me to feel good about the fact that I was giving this thought that I came up with the idea of really getting a baseline of how much I was vaping so that then I could be clear that I was actually cutting down.

Paul Warren: So I would say that's my general reaction, at least at this point.

Amy Shanahan: I was thinking as using

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Amy Shanahan: the affirmations and maybe the intention was to highlight the different types of affirmations that I did wonder as a worker in a role play, would I have really done that? That many times, I'm not sure. I probably wouldn't, but I don't know because it's now all there, but it's always something to talk about. How often and would I have done that? Maybe I would have done less, but it didn't feel too unnatural. I just wonder if I would have offered up that many instead of moving the conversation with other tools or skills. But Jen, you were watching and you listen in for these types of things. I'm wondering what your reaction is.

Jen Manuel: Yeah, I mean, I think I, I'm just looking back at the transcript, I think that there's the trade off, right? And so looking at one of the utterances here, like, vaping wasn't as enjoyable at first. that might be a moment to like what didn't you like about it? Or kind of like where you could elicit some change talk. You kind of said when you put your mind to something, you make it happen, which is going to move towards like, you

can do this, but sometimes. So there's these decision points, right? And there's lots of good ways to do it sometimes, you know, when we're, when we're affirming, we're moving towards change and just thinking about the momentum of change, I like to have kind of enough gas in the change talk tank of like, problem recognition, you know, reasons to change before I start transitioning to like, you know, what it would like to be to make a change. And so I think that's like, that's a transition point here or choice point, of, you know, you can do this kind of moving towards if the person's not sure they want to do it, that might not be in the right direction. And so that's, you know, I think we just have to be strategic. Like, affirmations are one tool in a very, you know, overflowing toolbox of different skills. And so, you know, I think that they can be used strategically. I think of them as like the readiness rulers and confidence rulers. You know, those are great tools and they can be used just like not the great time. Someone's like, I never want to make a change. And they're like, on a scale of one to ten, how ready you're to make this change, right. So, you know, I mean, I think they can get in the way. and so this is where I think it's so important to listen to our own work, right. And to pay attention to how things are landing, but to go back and say, like, how many, you know, even in a role play like that. You just did. Like, how many affirmations did I offer? what would have been like if I reflected, you know, change talk around problem recognition? Where might it have gone instead?

Amy Shanahan: Yeah. You know, it's interesting when you pointed out that particular utterance, because I was thinking, as I was saying, it almost felt a little persuasive.

Jen Manuel: Yeah.

Amy Shanahan: And I, and I loved your conversation or your comment about adding change talk to the gas tank first. makes a whole lot of sense. And I'm wondering, and of

course, we put this together with intention of putting types of affirmations in there because we wanted to highlight this advancement from affirmations in general, too simple and complex. And I'm wondering, and certainly the points are, well, for us to talk about the whole gestalt of using mi. I'm wondering if we could highlight for listeners who might look at the transcript on the website and go, hm. Which one of those are simple versus complex as examples? Or we could just offer up comparisons, but I think it might be helpful to pick some out and share some with the listeners so they could have that distinct. Well, what is a simple versus complex? I know that when I'm listening in the, I still am practicing. Oh, how would I just decide if that's simple versus complex affirmations?

Jen Manuel: Yes, I think it's helpful and I think I don't know of a coding system that differentiates simple and complex affirmations and just want to highlight since I know you've talked about the mighty here, the bar and the mighty for affirmations is different. It's higher. Right? Like, it's harder to get an affirmation in the mighty. And I think there's, I think affirmations are really hard to code because they're often complex reflections. And so, you know, when I'm working with coders, that's often a point where there's not a lot of reliability. Some people hear it as an affirmation, some people hear it as a reflection. so I think it's helpful for teaching. but I think, you know, just wanting to point out that overall it's one of those things that we spent

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Jen Manuel: a lot of time thinking about.

Jen Manuel: But doesn't necessarily, you know, get caught up, get. We're not analyzing it in other ways.

Amy Shanahan: Sure.

Jen Manuel: So when I look at.

Paul Warren: Yeah, no, go ahead. No, please, go ahead. Jen, you were going to say when you look at. Go ahead.

Jen Manuel: I was just looking to see some simple and complex. So. Yeah, let me look at that more.

Paul Warren: Yeah.

Jen Manuel: So I think about the difference between a simple and uncomplex is just this momentum too, of where I kind of building towards change. Talk with the affirmations. and so those are the things as I glance through here that I'm looking for, certainly. Like when you put your mind to something, you make it happen. I think that's on page two. That to me seems like a complex affirmation. It takes courage and it's part of someone's change process. You're courageous when it comes to reaching your goals. That's a complex affirmation. Those really stand out. The first one, like, thanks for coming in to talk with me. That again is kind of this more just simple affirmation of recognizing that someone's kind of taken the time to do that.

Paul Warren: Not.

Jen Manuel: A whole lot there. Right?

Amy Shanahan: Sure.

Paul Warren: Yeah, yeah. And you know what, I was just going to, as you continue to look at that one just piece that I want to underline, and this has been said a couple of times, but I really do want to underline it again, is this idea that we're not presenting this scenario as, quote unquote, the way to use simple and complex affirmations. We're presenting this scenario as a way to consider the distinction between simple and complex affirmations. And to Jen's point, and to a point that we've discussed a little bit already, what we're always gauging is how is what we're offering in terms of the affirmations, how are they landing and what is the timing of when we're offering them? And being cognizant of the Ernst cake that we don't want to be over frosting a cake because at a certain point you can no longer taste the cake and all there is is frosting.

Amy Shanahan: Right. Good points and a rich discussion even related to the point around coding it on the mighty versus just distinguishing the two.

Jen Manuel: Yeah, there's definitely affirmations that are affirmations that wouldn't necessarily be categorized as such in the mighty because it's such a high bar.

Amy Shanahan: Yeah.

Paul Warren: And again, our whole goal in this particular episode, and certainly for inviting Jen to be our guest and to offer her insights into this is really to create an opportunity for us as a community of people interested in motivational interviewing to be thinking about the evolution of simple and complex affirmations and where they fit within that robust toolbox that Jen alluded to that we have at our disposal when we have the opportunity to engage in an MI conversation.

Jen Miller: Do you foresee changing anything around the use of affirmations

Amy Shanahan: I'm curious, Jen, this fits for probably a lot of changes that are coming, as a result of the fourth edition of Miller and Rolnick's book, specifically to simple and complex affirmations and what you said about the not reliability of affirmations. And it's a high bar in the mighty. As a writer, coder, and trainer of the mighty, do you foresee changing anything around the use of affirmations or coding affirmations as this is evolving? and we're distinguishing between simple and complex?

Jen Manuel: I don't know, because most affirmations are complex reflections, and so the more so parsing them out, what does that tell us? Right, because then we lose them in this complex reflection category. I don't know. I haven't signed up to write a new mighty. Terry has either. And I think the mighty is, you know, Terry always says, like, it's a hammer, not a nail. Right.

Amy Shanahan: Like, it's not.

Jen Manuel: It can. It tells us when someone's doing m mi. But I think these nuances, I don't know that it can ever tell us, because some affirmations are just also not great. Right. And so. And we're going to be subject to coding them as such in the mighty. So there's a. You know, if they meet the criteria. So I think these things are also picked up in globals. Right. And so,

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Jen Manuel: And I always, you know, there is a certain amount of teaching to the test.

so the more, you know, when we put something in the coding system and fidelity monitoring, people then want to do it more. And that's. I think I worry about that with affirmations. I have always been a little perplexed about, like, why autonomy support isn't part of OARS. Like, I teach, actually, oars, because I think that's, really important. particularly, people are kind of feeling backed into a corner about a behavior change. So I think these are all good. Again, tools in the toolbox. And I think that I just. Personally, I'm starting to want to pull my hair out thinking about having a coding, system that can reliably differentiate affirmations from reflections. And then what would that tell us?

Amy Shanahan: Those are really helpful points in general, whether you make the change or not, why you wouldn't make the change.

Paul Warren: and, you know, I have to say, jen, this is probably one of the first times that the Lions and Tigers and Bears podcast has ended on a cliffhanger.

Jen Manuel: And with some sustained talk, I'm telling you, all the reasons I don't want to do.

Amy Shanahan: And neither Paul nor I are leaning into.

Jen Manuel: Can take it over.

Paul Warren: Jen, thank you so much for joining us today. it's really been a pleasure. And I hope that, you will join us again sometime in the future on some other equally as mysterious and cliffhanging topic.

Jen Manuel: This was a blast. Thanks so much for having me.

Amy Shanahan: Thank you, Jen, it's been a pleasure.

Paul Warren: Take care.

Amy Shanahan: Take care.

Paul Warren: Bye.

Thanks for listening to episode 23 of Lions and Tigers and Bears MI be on the lookout for new episodes coming out in the near future.

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