

Focusing in Motivational Interviewing: The Agenda Mapping Approach

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“At any point in the conversation, it can be helpful to step back and clarify or renegotiate what the agreed direction of travel might be.”

-Stephen Rollnick

In Motivational Interviewing, the Focusing task is not about choosing the “right” topic for someone—it’s about collaborating to decide together where attention might be most helpful. Traditional agenda setting often feels provider-driven: the clinician sets the direction, the client responds. Agenda mapping shifts this toward partnership, emphasizing autonomy and curiosity. Rather than narrowing too quickly, we pause to explore what matters most to the person sitting with us.

From “agenda-setting” to “agenda mapping”

Agenda mapping involves genuinely seeking collaboration and asking permission before moving into topics for change. When there are multiple areas on the table, a simple tool like a large “bubble sheet” [\[link\]](#) can help map out possibilities. Each bubble represents a topic—health, stress, relationships, habits, alcohol use—whatever is on the client’s mind and where there might be some ambivalence. The process is navigated with OARS (open questions, affirmations, reflections, summaries) and grounded in the Spirit of MI.

Sample Guiding Questions

- “How can we make this time most helpful for you?”
- “What areas of your life are on your mind right now?”
- “If you like, we can use this sheet to help us map out some possible topics to focus on together.”
- “Can we talk a bit more about [specific topic]?”

Prioritizing Together

Once several possible areas are mapped, the client can circle or mark the ones that feel most important. Using a smaller bubble sheet [\[link\]](#) allows us to break down larger topics into sub-topics—each with potential strands of change talk to explore. This “emerging agenda” keeps the process flexible and dynamic.

Moving Toward Evoking

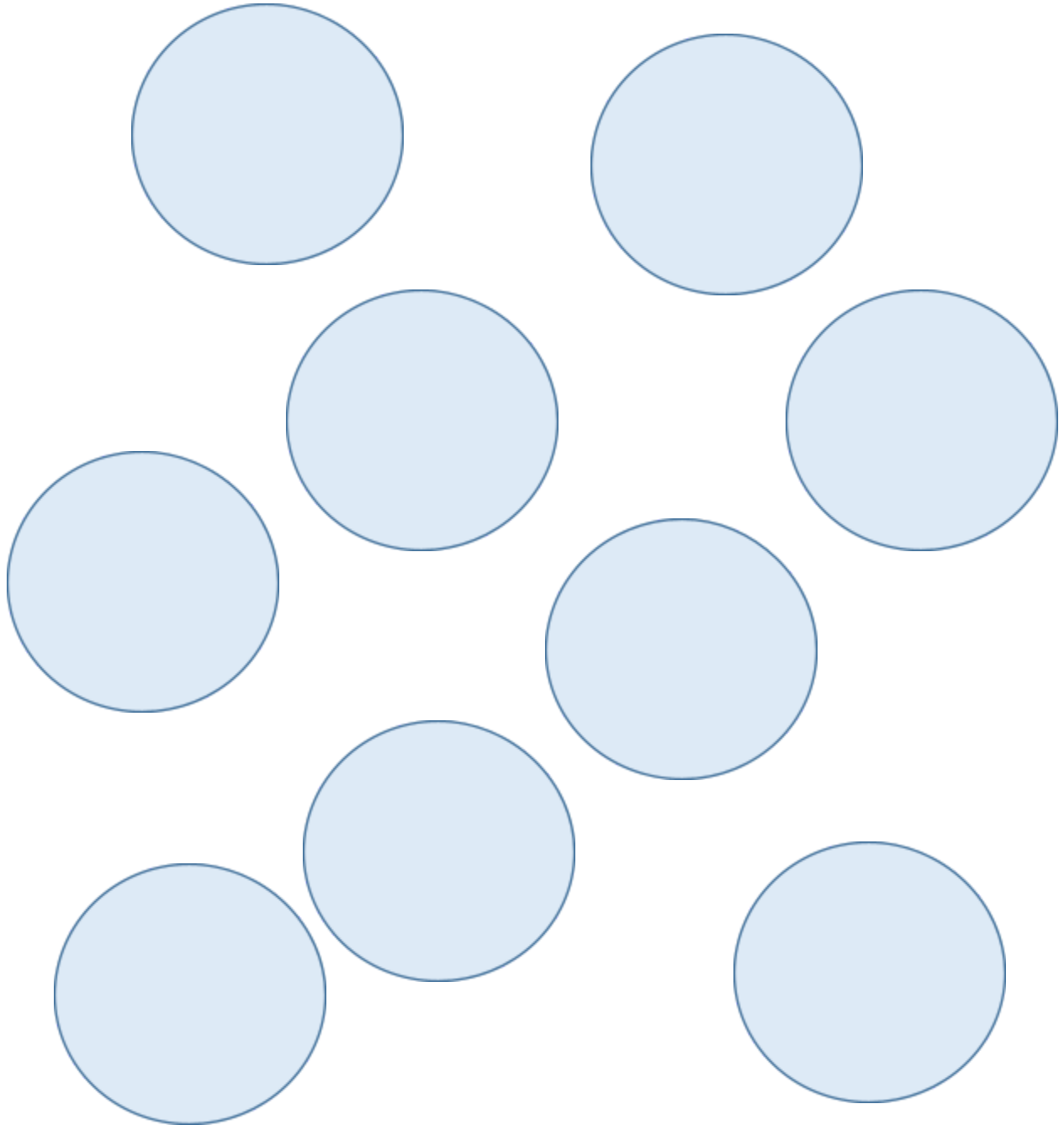
Agenda mapping is not the end point—it is the bridge into evoking. By identifying and prioritizing topics together, we set the stage for conversations that honor autonomy and strengthen motivation.

“Engagement is fundamental.

Without engagement, the collaborative essence of focusing is lost.”

-Nina Gobat, 2014

Agenda Mapping



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