

Understanding Polysubstance Use: Integrating Motivational Interviewing to Improve Engagement and Outcomes

Maria Hu, DSW, LCSW

Level

Intermediate

Room

Track

Substance Use Disorder

CE

CPA/BBS/CJER

Bio

Maria Hu, DSW, LCSW, is a clinical trainer with UCLA's Integrated Substance Abuse Programs (ISAP) and the Pacific Southwest Addiction Technology Transfer Center (PSATTC). She earned her Doctorate in Social Work from the University of Southern California, specializing in social justice and mental health. Maria has worked in the behavioral health field since 2006, providing culturally responsive mental health and substance use treatment to diverse communities.

Maria has also worked extensively in psychiatry, where she provided clinical oversight and training to multidisciplinary teams treating co-occurring disorders. In this role, she trained clinicians to effectively assess, engage, and treat individuals with substance use disorders and complex mental health conditions, emphasizing integrated and evidence-based approaches. She has delivered numerous trainings to clinical and non-clinical audiences on topics including the synergy of Motivational Interviewing and trauma-informed practices, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for substance use disorders, chronic pain, anxiety, and depression, Problem Solving Therapy, multicultural counseling, cultural humility, suicide prevention, race-based traumatic stress. She is formally trained in EMDR and has been practicing it with clients presenting with an array of conditions, including trauma and co-occurring behavioral health needs.

In addition to her training and clinical leadership, Maria has served as a professor and lecturer, teaching future clinicians how to provide services grounded in research, cultural humility, and self-reflection. Her presentation on polysubstance use draws upon her experience integrating research, clinical practice, and skills-based training to support professionals working with individuals experiencing substance use conditions.

Narrative

Polysubstance use continues to rise across forensic and behavioral health settings, creating significant challenges for providers responsible for assessment, treatment, supervision, and engagement. This presentation will discuss the CDC's Polysubstance Use Fact Sheet, which highlights that mixing drugs whether intentional or unintentional creates stronger, unpredictable, and often deadly effects, with nearly half of U.S. overdose deaths involving multiple substances.

The central focus of the session is the application of Motivational Interviewing (MI) as an evidence-based method to improve engagement with individuals experiencing polysubstance use. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of 22 studies (Pinto e Silva et al., 2025) demonstrated that MI produces measurable gains in treatment engagement, reductions in official recidivism, and decreases in treatment dropout among justice-involved clients. These findings are especially relevant given the high rates of ambivalence, external pressure, and trauma histories common in forensic populations.

Participants will learn how MI micro-skills specifically open-ended questions, affirmations, and reflective statements can be used to reduce resistance, strengthen therapeutic alliance, and enhance readiness for change. The workshop includes a brief skills-practice “MI Moment” exercise that allows attendees to apply simple, complex, and double-sided reflections to real-world scenarios.

This presentation integrates current research, evidence-based practice, and skill-building that can be applied across settings. Attendees will leave with strengthened MI skills, deeper conceptual understanding of polysubstance use patterns, and practical strategies to improve engagement and treatment outcomes within their agencies.

Learning Objectives

- Describe two interactions between polysubstance use and mental health in forensic populations
- Describe two health risks associated with combining stimulants, depressants, or alcohol in polysubstance use
- Describe at least two of the Motivational Interviewing Therapy micro-skills and explain how they can enhance a conversation about behavior change