

Responsivity Matters¹

Responsivity is the most misunderstood, least researched, and often unaddressed principle in the risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model. The basic tenet of the responsivity principle is that people are not all the same and a one-size-fits-all approach does not work. Therefore, interventions should be tailored to each person's traits and circumstances to promote engagement and to maximize learning and behavioral change.

The literature discusses two types of responsivity. **GENERAL RESPONSIVITY** states that we should use cognitive behavioral interventions, which are more effective than other types of interventions such as psychodynamic or other therapy models. **SPECIFIC RESPONSIVITY** states that we should consider a person's attributes and the environment in which interventions are provided.

THE RISK-NEED-RESPONSIVITY MODEL

Research shows that adhering to the RNR model results in recidivism reduction:

The RISK PRINCIPLE (WHO) states that the intensity of interventions and treatment should be matched to a person's assessed level of risk.

The NEED PRINCIPLE (WHAT) states that intervention and treatment goals should focus on a person's assessed criminogenic needs.

The RESPONSIVITY PRINCIPLE (HOW) states that we should use cognitive behavioral interventions and tailor them to an individual's unique characteristics.

Adherence to the responsivity principle requires the following:

1. KNOW THE PERSON'S ATTRIBUTES (biological, psychological, and social) that facilitate or limit learning and behavioral change. Use interviewing techniques to determine the presence of responsivity factors such as the following:

Age

Communication style

Culture

Emotions

Ethnicity

Family structure

Gender

Intelligence

Language

Learning style

Mental health

Motivation

Personality

Physical health

Race

Self-efficacy

Strengths

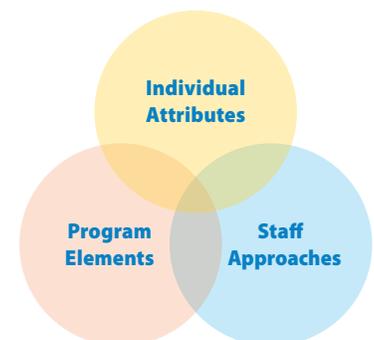
Trauma

2. CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT that is conducive to learning and behavioral change.

This involves aligning the three components of specific responsivity: an individual's attributes, program elements, and staff's approaches.

- **INDIVIDUAL ATTRIBUTES** refer to responsivity factors such as those listed above.
- **PROGRAM ELEMENTS** relate to program structure and service delivery. For example, if a person has an anxiety disorder, programming provided in an individual setting—in person or virtual—may be preferred to a group setting.
- **STAFF APPROACHES** relate to the justice system professional's communication style and level of professional alliance.

THE THREE COMPONENTS OF SPECIFIC RESPONSIVITY



¹ Source: Bonta, J., & Bourgon, G. (2014). Reconsidering the responsivity principle: A way to move forward. *Federal Probation*, 79(2). https://www.uscourts.gov/sites/default/files/78_2_1_0.pdf

STAFF APPROACHES THAT FACILITATE ENGAGEMENT AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

The research has shown three general approaches that facilitate engagement and behavioral change:

- **Motivational Interviewing (MI)** MI is a collaborative, goal-oriented communication style with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion.²
- **Core Correctional Practices** Building professional alliance, effective case planning and management, using skill practice, and responding to prosocial and noncompliant behavior have been found to improve outcomes for people who are justice-involved.
- **Collaboration** Working together with the person to identify their strengths and factors that have contributed to their behaviors, to develop case plan goals and action steps, and to build skills increases rapport, engagement, and, ultimately, success during and after supervision.

² Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press.

ARE YOU ATTENDING TO RESPONSIVITY?

Increased client engagement in programming and services (e.g., more frequent attendance, greater participation, acknowledgment of benefits), deeper learning (e.g., use of skills in practice and day-to-day situations), and behavioral change are all indicators of a focus on responsivity.

What does alignment look like?

The following are some examples of what aligning individual attributes, program elements, and staff approaches might look like:

Individual Attributes	Program Elements/Staff Approaches
Attention Span	Use approaches that are kinetic and interactive. Apply high-frequency, low-duration interventions.
Cognitive Deficits	Deliver highly individualized services. Use behavioral approaches that emphasize learning by repetition.
Cultural Background	Match people to justice system professionals and service providers who are culturally competent. Deliver training that uses culturally sensitive and meaningful examples and exercises.
Gender	Create a physically and emotionally safe environment (e.g., use people's preferred pronouns). Refer women to gender-responsive programming.
Learning Style	Use a variety of techniques to engage people, regardless of learning style. Provide flexibility in exercises.
Mental Health	Refer people for comprehensive mental health assessment. Stabilize people with treatment and medication before beginning programming.
Motivation	Consider using motivational enhancement curricula and techniques. Adjust the content and style of intervention to match people's stage of change.