



To Change Or Not To Change?

That Is The Question

Change can be hard, whether you're trying to start something (think exercise) or quit something (smoking or biting your nails). It is frustrating when you wonder why it doesn't just happen when you put your mind to it. It provokes feelings of guilt when others give you the Nike motivational speech ("Just do it") and you feel you're not making progress.

Well, change is not that simple and as you begin to think about changing some part of your behavior, it is useful to understand the mind/body stages you will go through, and to have some helpful hints on how to move through the stages to reach your goal.

The Stages of Change Model was developed in the late '70s by James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente.

They were researchers studying the process that smokers went through in order to give up their addiction. The model has proven to be relevant in so many facets of behaviour change that it has become *the* theory used today to help people with weight loss, addictions, bad habits and injury prevention, among other things.

The process of acknowledging *the desire to want to make a change* is one that has to happen internally. This means that you have to want to change because long term change cannot be externally imposed. In each stage, you will grapple with a variety of issues related to changing the behaviour and the time frame in doing so will be unique to you.



Break down your behaviour goal into small, achievable steps. When you do this, you experience daily successes that then fuel your desire to continue changing.

So what are the **Stages of Change**?

Pre-Contemplation

In this stage, you are not really thinking about changing at all – ‘ignorance is bliss’ is your mantra. You tend to defend your behaviour and feel it is not a problem. When friends approach you regarding your bad habit, you are not willing to discuss it and may be told you’re in denial.

If you know someone in this stage or wonder if you do have a negative habit, here are some techniques to begin moving through this stage:

- Don’t beat yourself or someone you love up about it. Understand that it is normal to be unprepared or unaware.
- Write out a list of the advantages and disadvantages to continuing the current behaviour, including how you are impacted physically, socially and mentally.
- Take some time to start thinking or talking about the possibility of changing. Focus on self-exploration, not action.

Contemplation

This is the ‘sitting on the fence’ stage. You are more aware of the consequences of the behaviour and you’re taking some time to think about it. However, you are still having a hard time seeing how the long term benefits of changing outweigh the short term costs.

People can stay in the contemplation stage for as little as one month or as long as they live. In fact, there are many people that think endlessly but never get around to doing anything about it.

In the most serious of situations, such as with drug addiction, sadly the consequences of not taking action often include the loss of a loved one.

The good news is that in this stage you are more willing to receive information regarding your habit or behaviour. What to work on in this stage is:

- Knowing that the decision to change is yours and only you will be able to take the steps needed.
- Being kind to yourself in your uncertainty about changing.
- Identifying what will change in your life in positive ways when you change – physically, socially and mentally.

Preparation

This is when you start to ‘test the waters.’ You may have attempted the change to a certain extent but with no consistent success. The key in this stage is that you have made a commitment to change. You hear yourself saying things like “I’ve got to do something,” “this is serious,” “this is not funny anymore,” or “now what can I

do?” You start talking about changing more and read up on some ways to help you do it.

Many times people jump right in and try to change their behaviour immediately, which often fails because there is a lack of a plan and support in place. At this stage you may find it helpful to:

- Identify possible barriers to change and ways to overcome these. There may be internal and/or external barriers.
- Gather a solid support network of people who will assist you positively through this process. Sometimes those close to us have a hard time with allowing us to change, and it’s important to limit the exposure you have to negativity and sabotage.
- Break down your behaviour goal into small, achievable steps. When you do this, you experience daily successes that then fuel your desire to continue changing. And having a concrete written plan allows you to stay focused and not question your next step. Trying to change all at once is a recipe for failure. It took you a long time to master this bad behaviour and it will take a while to successfully kick it! Slow and steady wins the race.

Action

Yeah! You’re really making things happen now. In the action stage, you are now practicing the new behaviour or are actively involved in the process, using a variety of techniques. This is often the shortest of all stages, usually lasting from three to six months. This is when a certain amount of raw willpower comes into play, and where relapse is most prevalent. The following are ways to continue with the positive momentum of the action stage:

- Re-evaluate and utilize your social support to your best advantage.
- Develop short term rewards to enhance your motivation.
- Acknowledge the work you are doing and write down the daily successes you’ve had or things you appreciate about what you did that day.
- Acknowledge the feelings of loss you might have at this time in giving up the previous behaviour or habit. It’s okay to feel sad and is a natural part of letting go. Also, feelings of guilt, anger, irritability and despair are all part of saying goodbye to something that we have used on a daily basis.

Maintenance

Congratulations! If you’ve reached the maintenance stage, you have been able to sustain the new behaviour for a minimum of six months to five years. You are able

continued on next page



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to avoid the temptations to return to the old behaviour and you constantly remind yourself of your progress and the significance of your achievement.

To continue with your success in maintenance, you should:

- Plan for follow-up support. Don't let those great friends and support networks just vanish. Maintain a connection.
- Reinforce internal rewards by focusing on the physical, social and mental benefits you have accrued through the change you've made. Make yourself a list or collage of all the great things that are in your life now because of your change.
- Acknowledge that you may relapse and know that this is a normal experience during change. Being aware of the possibility of relapse will enable you to plan the coping strategies you will need to get back on track.

Relapse

This is your 'fall from grace' and if you're not prepared for the possibility of it, then you set yourself up to fall further into the abyss. Most people experience relapse. In fact, many people often go through all the Stages of Change in one day or fall back one stage and have to go through that stage again. The Stages of Change is not a linear model, but one that moves in and out, depending on each individual. Here's what to focus on if you end up in this stage:

- Don't view your slip into this stage as a failure. It is normal and often expected to relapse. The important thing is that you regain your focus and don't allow your self-confidence to be affected.
- Relapsing is like falling off a horse – the best thing you can do is get right back on! However, keep in mind you don't want to go back to pre-contemplation or contemplation. Restart the process at preparation, action or even maintenance, depending on what you need to review and reestablish.

• Review what contributed to the relapse and develop a plan on how to combat similar experiences in the future.

• Review the positive aspects of the whole process of change. This is why it's so important from day one to write down your journey, whether it be in list form, journaling, a collage or a video/audio tape. It's so easy to forget how far we have come and the tools we used to get there if we don't document it. If documented, when we do have to revisit the process of change, we don't have to reinvent the wheel.

Transcendence

There has been another stage added by Dr. Kern that is not part of the original Stages of Change Model – the Transcendence stage.

This stage suggests that if you remain in the maintenance stage long enough, you will reach a point where you have a distinct understanding of the psychology and emotions that surround the 'new you.'

In this stage, not only is the old habit not even part of your daily awareness, but the thought of going back to it seems completely foreign and unimaginable.

So, before you think about kicking that bad behaviour or start feeling bad about why you can't just do it, remember the Stages of Change. It's a process that, when gone through patiently and thoroughly, can make the 'old you' a thing of the past, and more likely to stay there. **MP**

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