

The Stages of Change

Behavior change follows a series of stages. Successful change comes from knowing what stage you are in for the problem at hand. And although research shows we often relapse several times before moving forward, with each relapse we understand more about ourselves and gain greater strength to move forward.

Noted psychologist James Prochaska, PhD., John Norcross, PhD and Carlo DiClemente, PhD have performed more than fifty studies over the past twelve years on "self-changer." The researchers then developed their results into a model for change. They found that people use a variety of tools to help them reach their goals, but these tools are used only at specific times. In *Changing for Good*, the authors describe the six "stages of change."

Pre-contemplation	"I really don't want to change. I'm fine the way I am."
Contemplation	"I'll consider it."
Preparation	"I'm making a plan for it."
Action	"I'm doing it, but not regularly."
Maintenance	"I'm doing it."
Termination	"I have no desire to go back to my own ways."

Stage 1 – Pre-contemplation - "I really don't want to change. I'm fine the way I am."

Typical pre-contemplators don't believe they have a problem. They may try to change due to the force of others, as their first goal is usually to "get others to stop nagging" them. (*I'll stop smoking so the kids stop pressuring me.*) They place the responsibility for their problem on society, genetics, and destiny – factors that are out of their control. (*There's nothing I can do. My dad died of a heart attack, and I probably will too.*)

Pre-contemplators can move to the next stage by becoming educated. Smokers need to hear that their habit can kill them. Overeaters need to learn about the potential risk of high blood pressure, obesity and heart disease. Knowledge is power and will move the pre-contemplator on to the next stage.

Stage 2 – Contemplation - "I'll consider it."

Contemplators are aware of and have acknowledged their problem, are seriously considering changing, but just aren't ready. Individuals can be stuck in this stage for years. They are open to information from books and articles and will talk to people about their problem, but aren't quite ready to give up the comfort of the familiar habits.

When contemplators start to think more about the future than the past, begin to focus on the solution rather than the problem and start to take responsibility for their own health and well-being they are moving in the direction of Stage 3, Preparation.

Stage 3 – Preparation - "I'm making a plan for it."

Preparation is the planning stage. Those in this stage are committed to the change and may have already taken some small steps towards their goal (ex: joined a health club, started counting calories, cut back on cigarette consumption, joined a support group, etc.) Now they must set a very specific goal and list the action steps necessary to get there.

Willingness to change must be converted into an "I can do it" belief. And they need to be able to acknowledge that there will be some tough times ahead.

Stage 4 – Action - *"I'm doing it, but not regularly."*

The action stage requires the greatest commitment of time and energy. Changes become more visible to others. It's tempting to associate action with lasting change, but that's only half the battle.

Those in the action stage need to accept the loss of the comfortable old ways. Setting step by step goals is an important part of mastering this stage. Initially, people may have to avoid certain situations that are too tempting or make them feel too guilty. Eventually, it will become easier to overcome the cues that trigger the problem behavior. Positive reinforcement, whether from within or others, is extremely helpful...and so is making a self-contract.

Stage 5 – Maintenance - *"I'm doing it."*

It can take months to establish a new habit, and relapses can occur. Maintenance occurs when a behavior change lasts for a long time, in spite of occasional setbacks. We're familiar with the sayings, *"You're only a puff away from a pack a day"*, *Stopping is easy, I do it every day* or *"I must have lost the same twenty pounds ten times."* Action without maintenance leads to relapse.

Maintenance requires building on all the work done during the action stage. Former problems will always hold some attraction. Acknowledgement of vulnerability is important. It means the process is still ongoing. Remembering the negative aspects of the old behaviors, (the nagging smoker's cough, the larger size clothes helps to increase one's confidence in their ability to maintain the new behaviors successfully.

Stage 6 – Termination - *"I have no desire to go back to my old ways."*

Some experts believe that termination is impossible and the best one can hope for is a lifetime of maintenance. The authors of *Changing for Good* feel that there are at least four defining criteria that separates the terminators from the lifetime maintainers. These are:

- Developing a significant change in attitude with a new self-image.
- Experiencing no temptation to return to old habits.
- Becoming fully confident with a solid level of self-knowledge and full development of a new lifestyle.

What stage are you in? Think about what habit you want to change and where your attitude fits in the above categories. Then read on to see if you're experiencing any barriers to moving from one stage to the next.

Review the Stages of Change and answer the following questions.

Question 1 – Where do you find yourself in relation to your goal or specific skill objectives related to your goal? _____

Question 2 – What specifically do you think you will need to change about yourself in order to be successful in your goal? _____

Question 3 – Do others tell that you "should" do or act differently, yet you see no reason to change? _____

Question 4 – Do you see reasons for both changing and not changing? List 5 reasons not to change and 5 reasons to change (or work towards your goal).

5 Reasons Not to Change	5 Reasons To Change
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

Question 5 – What are your reasons to want to change (or work towards your goal) and strategizing ways to make the change?

Question 6 – What do you think will be your three biggest barriers to making the necessary changes that will allow you to achieve your goal?

Question 7 – Have you tried in the past to work on this skill? Were you successful? What happened that you again need to work on this skill? What contributed to your past success and what contributed to your relapse?

Sources of Resistance to Change

Anyone who has tried to bring about change, whether in themselves or in others, has met with some type of resistance. The question is, why do people resist change? Clearly, they do not always or inevitably resist it. What explains the commonly encountered resistance to change?

If we look at any change from the point of view of people affected by it, we can identify a number of bases for resistance. In particular, people will resist change when...

- They perceive it to be threatening to their basic securities.
- They do not understand it.
- It is imposed on them.
- A rational calculation of the risk makes the change appear foolish.
- The change contradicts some of their fundamental values.
- There is a desire not to lose something of value.
- There is a misunderstanding of the change and its implications.
- There is a low tolerance for change.

Finding the Root cause of resistance is the key to finding ways of dealing with our fears and moving forward...

Resistance is a way for people to say "No" to changes they are uncomfortable with. Others often use threats or exert more control over people who resist – which only deepens our resistance. When others, as well as ourselves, take the time to find the causes of resistance and deal with them appropriately – the result softens the resistance.

With respect to change itself, and adopting it, there are five perceived characteristics which affect our likelihood of adopting the change. They are:

1. What is the relative advantage of adopting it? Is the change sufficiently better than what we are doing now?
2. Is the change compatible with my values and needs?
3. Will adopting the change be complicated?
4. Will I be able to adopt the change on a trial basis?
5. Will I be able to anticipate the effects of the change in advance?

Consequences of Change

The consequences of change include those defined by people as both desirable and undesirable. Any particular change can have manifold consequences for us, but not all of those consequences will be welcomed to people.

An individual might handle change in one area as long as he or she has stability in other areas. When we are forced to confront situations that require us to continually adapt and readapt in all areas of our lives, our capacity for adaption simply cannot handle the challenges.

People who perceive the world to be changing very rapidly around them do have higher levels of stress than others, but the stress is moderated if they define the changes as *desirable*. In other words, the same change can have very different impacts upon people depending upon whether they define change as desirable or undesirable. For one person, the computerization of the workplace poses a threat, while another finds it challenging. For one person, a new housing code causes financial strain, while another finds it desirable because it enhances property values. Any change will be defined as desirable by some and as undesirable by others; the consequences for physical and emotional wellbeing will therefore also differ.