

# The 'Stages of Change' Approach to Changing Behavior<sup>1</sup>

One role of health care professionals is to assist their patients in making the changes necessary for health improvement. Exercise programs, stress management techniques and dietary restrictions are some common recommendations that require personal motivation.

- A change in lifestyle is necessary for successful management of long-term illness
- Poor health or illness can often be attributed to falling back into unhealthy behavior patterns

While most people easily understand the lifestyle modifications that would lead to better health (i.e., "I need to eat less, quit smoking, get more exercise etc."), consistent, life-long behavior changes are difficult. A feeling of failure, especially when repeated, may cause people to give up and avoid contact with their health care provider or avoid treatment altogether.

## Understanding Change

Behavior change is rarely a discrete, single event. Occasionally people, after experiencing a medical crisis and being advised to change the contributing behavior, readily comply. However, most people find it very difficult to change. During the past decade, behavior change has come to be understood as a **process** of identifiable stages through which people pass.

**Behavior change is rarely a discrete, single event; people move gradually from being uninterested (precontemplation stage) to considering a change (contemplation stage) to deciding and preparing to make a change.**

The "Stages of Change" model shows that, for most people, a change in behavior occurs gradually, with the person moving from being uninterested, unaware or unwilling to make a change (*precontemplation*), to considering a change (*contemplation*), to deciding and *preparing* to make a change. Genuine, determined action is then taken and, over time, attempts to maintain the new behavior occur. **Relapses are almost inevitable and become part of the process of working toward life-long change.**

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: [A 'Stages of Change' Approach to Helping Patients Change Behavior](#), GRETCHEN L. ZIMMERMAN, PSY.D., CYNTHIA G. OLSEN, M.D., and MICHAEL F. BOSWORTH, D.O. Wright State University School of Medicine, Dayton, Ohio

## **Precontemplation Stage**

During the precontemplation stage, patients do not even consider changing. Smokers who are "in denial" may not see that the advice applies to them personally. People with high cholesterol levels may feel "immune" to the health problems that strike others. Overweight or obese patients may have tried unsuccessfully so many times to lose weight that they have simply given up.

## **Contemplation Stage**

During the contemplation stage, people are ambivalent about changing. Giving up an enjoyed behavior causes them to feel a sense of loss despite the perceived gain. During this stage, patients assess barriers (e.g., time, expense, hassle, fear, "I know I need to, doc, but ...") as well as the benefits of change.

## **Preparation Stage**

During the preparation stage, patients prepare to make a specific change. They may experiment with small changes as their determination to change increases. For example, sampling low-fat foods may be an experimentation with or a move toward greater dietary modification. Switching to a different brand of cigarettes or decreasing their drinking signals that they have decided a change is needed.

## **Action Stage**

The action stage is the one that most physicians are eager to see their patients reach. Many failed New Year's resolutions provide evidence that if the prior stages have been glossed over, action itself is often not enough. Any action taken by patients should be praised because it demonstrates the desire for lifestyle change.

Maintenance and relapse prevention involve incorporating the new behavior "over the long haul." Discouragement over occasional "slips" may halt the change process and result in the person giving up. However, most patients find themselves "recycling" through the stages of change several times before the change becomes truly established.

**Most people find themselves "recycling" through the stages of change several times ("relapsing") before the change becomes truly established.  
Do not get discouraged!**

However, we learn something valuable about ourselves and about the process of change with every step forward, and backward!

# Readiness to Change Inventory

People go through **stages** as they make important changes in their health behaviors. All the stages are important. We learn from each stage. We go **from** "not thinking about it" **to** "weighing the pros and cons" **to** "making little changes and figuring out how to deal with the real hard parts" **to** "doing it!" and finally, **to** "making it part of our lives." Many people "fall off the wagon" and go through all the stages several times before the change really lasts.

1. On the line below, mark where you are now on this line that measures change in behavior. Are you not prepared to change, already changing or someplace in the middle?

**Not prepared to change** ..... **Already changing**

2. Answer the questions below that apply to you.

If your mark is on the left side of the line:

- How will you know when it's time to think about changing?
- What signals will tell you to start thinking about changing?
- What qualities in yourself are important to you?
- What connection is there between those qualities and "not considering a change"?

If your mark is somewhere in the middle:

- Why did you put your mark there and not further to the left?
- What might make you put your mark a little further to the right?
- What are the good things about the way you're currently trying to change?
- What are the not-so-good things?
- What would be the good result of changing?
- What are the barriers to changing?

If your mark is on the right side of the line:

- Pick one of the barriers to change and list some things that could help you overcome this barrier.
- Pick one of those things that could help and decide to do it by \_\_\_\_\_ (write in a specific date).

If you've taken a serious step in making a change:

- What made you decide on that particular step?
- What has worked in taking this step?
- What helped it work?
- What could help it work even better?
- What else would help?
- Can you break that helpful step down into smaller pieces?
- Pick one of those pieces and decide to do it by \_\_\_\_\_ (write in a specific date).

If you're changing and trying to maintain that change:

- Congratulations! What's helping you?
- What else would help?
- What are your high-risk situations?

If you've "fallen off the wagon":

- What worked for a while?
- Don't kick yourself--long-term change almost always takes a few cycles.
- What did you learn from the experience that will help you when you give it another try?