

STAGES OF CHANGE OVERVIEW

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Introduction

The Stages of Change Model helps explain the process of behavior change. It describes a person's readiness to change using a five-stage process. People go through these stages at their own pace.

The Stages of Change Model evolved from smoking cessation programs and drug and alcohol addiction treatments. It has now been applied to a variety of other health behaviors. The basic premise is that behavior change is a process rather than an event, and that individuals are at varying levels of motivation, or readiness, to change. People at different points in the process respond best to efforts tailored to their particular stage.



Stage 1: Pre-contemplation

In the pre-contemplation stage, people are not thinking seriously about changing. People in this stage may defend their current habit(s) when other people pressure them to change. They do not see their behavior as a problem and may be unaware a problem exists.

Example: Ginger has no desire, thought or intention of starting an exercise program.

In pre-contemplation, the person:

- Does not see behavior as a problem.
- Is not interested in discussing the behavior with others who see the behavior as a problem.
- Has no intention of changing the behavior.
- Is unaware of the risks or easily rationalizes them.
- May have made previous attempts to change and feels hopeless about change.

Stage 2: Contemplation

In the contemplation stage, people are more aware of the personal consequences of their habits. They may spend time thinking about the problem but have not made a commitment to take action. Although they are able to consider the possibility of changing, they tend to be hesitant about it and may weigh the pros and cons of changing their behavior. They may be unsure if the long-term benefits outweigh the short-term costs. People in the contemplation stage may be more open to receiving information about behavior change than before. They are more likely to take advantage of educational opportunities. This stage may last a few weeks or forever. Some people spend a lifetime thinking about a change but never take action.

Example: Ginger is considering starting an exercise program but is not ready to begin yet.

In contemplation, the person:

- Has some awareness of the need to change behavior.
- Begins to realize the risks of the behavior.
- Is actively weighing the pros and cons of the behavior change.
- Expresses awareness of the need for change, but may waver in willingness to change.

Stage 3: Preparation

In the preparation stage, a person commits to change and intends to make the change within the next month. Typical activities in this stage include researching how to make the change, such as gathering information, developing strategies and identifying resources. Preparation is an important stage to make action more successful. This stage helps a person think through the benefits of making a change. Skipping from the contemplation stage to the action stage without the necessary preparation makes maintaining the change less likely.

Example: Ginger wants to start exercising. She buys a new pair of athletic shoes and workout clothes. She also researches several nearby gyms to find out their costs and benefits.

In preparation, the person:

- Believes behavior change is possible and that the change can be managed.
- Has made some successful attempts to change in the past.
- Expresses intent to change.
- Clearly sees the benefits of changing the behavior.



Stage 4: Action

This stage involves the most time and energy. It can last from three to six months. Barriers that may be encountered and strategies to overcome them must be considered. Setting short-term goals can be helpful. Motivation can be sustained by rewarding success and asking family and friends to help with accountability. People in this stage are likely to seek support from others. An environment that is supportive of the new behavior is essential. Relapse risk is greatest in the action stage.

Example: Ginger makes it her goal to exercise 3-5 days a week for 20-30 minutes each day.

In action, the person:

- Has started to make the behavior change.
- Is emotionally, intellectually and behaviorally prepared to make the change consistently.
- Has expressed commitment to change.
- Has developed plans to maintain change.



Stage 5: Maintenance

In the maintenance stage, the focus is on maintaining the new behavior and resisting temptation to return to old habits. During this stage, it is important to anticipate situations and barriers that could lead to relapse. Coping strategies should be planned in advance to avoid relapse when barriers are present.

Example: Exercise is now a habit for Ginger and will continue to be included in her schedule for the long-term.

In maintenance, the:

- New behavior is practiced consistently for more than six months.
- New behavior is becoming habitual.
- Person expresses confidence in the ability to continue change.

Relapse

Relapse is common when trying to change behavior. When a person relapses, they fall out of their new habits and return to old, unhealthy behaviors. While relapse can be discouraging, it is important to consider what triggered a relapse and to restart the process again at the preparation, action or maintenance stage.



Example: Ginger went on vacation for a week and had difficulty getting back into an exercise routine. Rather than count this as a failure and giving up, she reviewed her goals and determined how she could start exercising again.



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