

MAKING CHANGES

With the start of a new year, many of us are reflecting on our behaviors over the past year. What is it about making changes that is so hard? We may start out doing very well, only to fall back into the old behaviors even when we are aware that they are not in our best interest. How do people make changes such as losing weight or stopping smoking? It is important to realize that change involves a process over time and requires more than just knowing it is a good idea. Understanding the stages we go through in the change process can be helpful.

Three psychologists who have studied this change process have identified six different stages that human beings go through to accomplish changes in their behaviors. (Changing For Good, by James D. Prochaska, Ph. D., John C. Norcross, Ph. D., and Carlo C. DiClemente, Ph. D.) People may move back and forth from stage to stage or may become stuck in a particular stage for a time before moving forward or backward again. It is important to see this process of taking two steps forward and one back as a normal part of the process rather than a failure on our part; change is about progress and not perfection.

Stage 1. Precontemplation: At first we may be unaware that we have a problem or unwilling to accept it; this is sometimes called “denial”. “Yes, I know I should probably quit smoking, but I just don’t want to.” “I’m not really overweight, I just have big bones.”

Stage 2. Contemplation: At this stage we begin to acknowledge that there is a problem and we begin to think about future changes in that behavior. “I know I need to stop smoking, and I will one of these days.” “I think I need to eat healthier.”

Stage 3. Preparation: Once we have decided to change a behavior, we need to prepare for it. This stage involves making concrete plans and how to carry them out. A word of caution here – people frequently do not succeed in making changes because they don’t think it through all the way or don’t make their plans concrete enough. To stop smoking requires more than to just stop buying cigarettes and losing weight involves more than skipping a few desserts.

Stage 4. Action: Once you have made your plan, it is time to implement it. This stage is called action because it is about doing something, not just thinking about it.

Stage 5. Maintenance: Even with a good plan a lot of us have trouble maintaining it over the long haul. We are gung-ho for the first few days or weeks but then we slip back into the old behaviors. Remember what I said about going back and forth in the stages? Unfortunately we usually feel like a failure and just give up in frustration. Next time remember these stages, remind yourself about progress not perfection, and go back to your plan. You can either put your plan back into action, amend it or create a new plan that might be more effective. The best plans are those that help us shift out attitudes and make lifestyle changes over time rather than just making a

short term change. How effective is it to throw away all your cigarettes and then go out with friends who smoke all the time? How many of you have gone on a crash diet and lost weight quickly, only to go back to your old eating patterns and regaining the weight you lost and more besides? As we maintain the behavior change, it becomes a normal part of our life; things like eating a healthier diet and avoiding second hand smoke.

Stage 6. Termination: Once the change has become a normal part of our routine life, it is no longer about making a change so this stage is called termination.

If you are making New Year's Resolutions and wanting them to succeed, consider these stages of change and how you can most effectively move through them.

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