

Change is A Process Not An Event

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Welcome. This is the first in a series of many articles I will write and make available to you through my website. It is my hope that the articles will inform and inspire you. I welcome your requests for specific article topics, and will do my best to include those in future articles.

If you're reading this article no doubt you are facing or thinking about an important change in your life. When we consider the way change happens it becomes clear that change is a process. Change doesn't happen overnight. For instance, even before we make a change we spend time thinking about or discussing a situation with friends or others. Or we may have tried to make a change without the success we hoped for, and landed back where we started, or so it seemed.

Many people ask "How do I know when I'm ready to make a change?" Or, "why don't I just make the change that I think I want—why am I procrastinating?"

The psychologists Prochaska and DiClemente (1982) developed a way of explaining change. Each stage indicates a level of readiness for change, and describes the characteristics (behaviours, thoughts, emotions) that tend to occur in each stage.

Stage 1: Pre-Contemplation

In this stage you are not considering a change. This may be referred to as being in denial ("ignorance is bliss"). Sometimes denial prevents us from facing or feeling the pain of a necessary change. Or sometimes we are truly unaware of a problem, and are surprised when someone mentions it. You may believe the current way is the best and only way for you to be. The costs of not changing may be unknown to you.

Stage 2: Contemplation

In this stage you may have some awareness of a problem, unmet need or interest in changing.

However you may respond to others' comments about it as though you're on autopilot—not really acknowledging or relating to what is being pointed out. You are somewhat confused, and may shift back and forth about a decision. You may feel distressed when thinking about or discussing the topic. Denial may still be active in this stage, but less so as you begin to see the facts of the circumstances more clearly.

Stage 3: Preparation or Determination

You may experiment with the change ("checking it out; testing the waters"), and start planning, including setting dates. You may even make the change (e.g., quit smoking for a week or day; search for a counsellor and book an appointment). At this point you likely recognize more than before that you need to make a change—the benefits outweigh the costs. If something prevents you from moving past this stage/forward with the change you may move back to a previous stage ("I just can't do this right now; it's too difficult". Or, "it's not really that bad; it'll be ok the way it is").

Stage 4: Action

You have chosen a change strategy and are working through some aspects of it. You are more aware of old strategies that don't work.

You engage in some new ways of thinking and behaving that support the change. This is often a "stormy" time as you let go of some of the old ways. You may feel very uncomfortable as you step out of your old comfort zone and act differently.

Feelings of loss and increased awareness of underlying/contributing factors may become apparent to you.

At this stage you will need to engage your resources in supporting your change. This may include friends, family, or other positive support groups, your doctor, other health professional, and/or counsellor.

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Stage 5: Maintenance

In this stage your commitment to the change continues. Change behaviours are sustained and increased. You notice the rewards. You engage your support system when you need it to help you sustain the change. You actively discuss and develop positive coping strategies, including prevention of relapsing/returning to the old behaviours.

This stage is very challenging for many people, particularly when the change involves letting go of addictive behaviours (alcohol, other drugs, tobacco, food, sex, gambling), unhealthy relationships or situations.

Though counselling/therapy can be useful at any change stage it may be particularly important at this time to help you deal with mental and emotional distress, heal from the past, and build your self-confidence in dealing with the challenges that may prevent further progress.

If you do not attend to the underlying issues and build new skills it will be difficult to continue with the change in the short- and long term. For instance, with addictive behaviours such as binge eating/compulsive eating, smoking, or alcohol addiction, if you do not have positive ways of dealing with internal stressors (e.g., intense emotions, negative thoughts) and external stressors (e.g., triggering situations, work and family demands) you may find yourself at the next change stage sooner rather than later.

Stage 6: Relapse

Relapse happens for many people. Some say it is a necessary part of successful long-term change. At this stage you resume the old behaviours or some of the old behaviours.

Relapse is an opportunity for personal growth. This is a time to review the circumstances that led you revert to the old ways of thinking and acting, and strengthen and develop additional skills and strategies to cope with the triggers. Exploring and recalling the benefits of the change will be essential at this point.

Relapse does not have to be a setback. This is important to know and remember, particularly

because it is typical to feel discouraged and less motivated at this point. You may want to give up.

Relapse is also a time to reinforce your strengths and recall your accomplishments in support of your change. It is a time to encourage forward movement and resumption of Stages 4 Action and 5 Maintenance. In fact, some people move again through the earlier stages as they experience increased confusion about what they want and what they are prepared to change.

There is still hope! It is important to keep in mind that the change process does not typically unfold in a linear way. Rather, people move back and forth through the stages as we contemplate our lives, what we want and what we need.

Also, the length of time spent in any stage, time of onset of each stage and frequency with which we revisit stages varies with each person, the nature of the change, and related circumstances and contributing factors.

This model of change suggests that change is a process that can be navigated successfully with greater understanding of what is involved in changing. From this you may recognize that you are always changing in some way, and therefore engaged in some stage of change. Knowing this we can choose to accept change as normal, and embrace the changes that are good for us.

*"The Journey of a Thousand
Miles Begins With a Single*

Step"

Lao Tse

