

The Stages of Change

Source This material was summarized and excerpted from *Changing for Good: A Revolutionary Six-Stage Program for Overcoming Bad Habits and Moving Your Life Positively Forward*. James Prochaska, PhD, John Norcross, PhD, Carlo DiClemente, PhD, Avon Books, 1994.

Introduction James Prochaska has been a man with a mission. After he lost his father to alcoholism, despite his family’s best efforts to help, he became determined to figure out a way to help people change their destructive habits. Prochaska, an academic psychologist at the University of Rhode Island and two colleagues began a research project seeking out ordinary people who on their own had dropped bad habits, such as smoking and overeating. After years of studying these successful changers, Prochaska discovered an insight: **change is not a one-time event--it is a process**. His resulting change process is commonly called the “Stages of Change” model.

Premise The central applied premise of Prochaska’s work is straightforward: name a behavior that you want or need to change, figure out what stage you are in, and then take the steps that the model recommends to move forward to the next stage. Of course, we all know that changing difficult habits does not proceed so straightforwardly. Sometimes Prochaska’s successful changers fell back a stage or two, but once they resumed the strategies specific to their stage, they’d be back on track.

Stage 1: Pre-contemplation This stage is one we’re all familiar with, the stage before we have decided to make a change (i.e., “I ain’t even thinking about it.”). There is awareness that there’s a problem, such as on the path to addiction, when people have attempted but failed to curb their use. This stage is emotionally characterized by:

- Minimizing the behavior (i.e., “I’m going to die anyway; why change?”)
- Defensiveness (“Who put you in charge?”)
- Ignorance (“I don’t think the experts know yet for sure that this is bad, so I’m going to wait until more studies are done.”)

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Stage 1: Pre-contemplation (cont'd)

Am I in this stage? Ask yourself the following three questions and you will begin to see the distinction between a problem behavior and a non-problematic lifestyle choice:

1. Will I discuss my behavior?
2. What do I (need to) know about my behavior?
3. Will I take responsibility for the consequences of my behavior?

Strategy for moving forward: Use Your Brain

This isn't the time to "just do it" because people in this stage are not emotionally prepared or well-informed enough to develop an effective plan for change. Instead, try to:

1. **Raise awareness.** Start a learning process about how changing your habit will benefit you.
 2. **Become aware of your defenses.** Precontemplators tend to minimize the problem, blame others for their problem, or rationalize their behavior.
 3. **Use helping relationships.** Take advantage of people who care about you by letting them help you. You can do this by asking someone you trust to help you identify your defenses. You can also let them know that you are not ready for action, but can use their support in helping you to get there.
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Stage 2: Contemplation

This is when there is acceptance of a problem, when denial has stopped working, but you're still not ready to change. This is a stage of ambivalence, because you may want to change, but also unwittingly resist it. Because of this, it can be easy to get stuck here. Your next step is planning, but if you keep sliding back to the contemplation stage, it's probably because you pushed yourself straight into action too soon – easy does it.

Strategy: Figure Out What's Blocking You

Some of the negative traps you can fall into in this stage are:

- waiting for the "instant, easy change" when you hope change will happen without effort
- hopeful thinking that allows you to go on as you always have, but with different consequences
- premature action, such as impulsive New Year's resolutions or caving to pressure from loved ones before you're genuinely ready to move forward.

According to Prochaska, you must be aware of what the problem is and what the solutions are, before you can start moving towards action, via the preparation stage.

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Stage 3: Preparation

This is the stage where you begin to seriously work on committing to change. The critical effort here is to resolve your underlying emotional ambivalence. In this stage you are moving this change to the top of your list of things to do. This requires a willingness to act but also a belief in your ability to change, which in turn reinforces your will.

Strategy: Make a Careful, Specific Plan

- Take small, preparatory steps (such as changing to a different brand of cigarettes, switching to low-fat foods, etc.)
- Set a date, ideally within the next month
- Announce your plan – it takes courage to go public, but it is more powerful than private pledges.
- Make your plan for change a priority – accept that other areas of your life may suffer for a short while as a result
- Personalize your Action Plan – if a plan is truly developed by you, it will maximize your commitment to it, so select features that really make sense to you
- Envision the “new you” that you will be creating by implementing this change: a healthier you, a person who is not ruled by addictive behavior, someone who is doing what they can to help their body fend off disease...

Stage 4: Action

Once the commitment is made, it is time to act. In this stage, the focus is on replacing problem behaviors with healthy ones, managing your surroundings, and rewarding yourself while continuing to rely on the supportive people in your life.

Strategy: Put Your Plan in Motion

Replace problem behaviors with healthy ones: this substitution is known as “countering” (i.e., prompting yourself to get off the couch, seltzer water instead of alcohol, a walk instead of a junk food snack)

Manage your surroundings: restructuring your environment so that the occurrence of a problematic behavior is significantly reduced (i.e., walk on by the bar!)

Reward yourself: reinforcing the actions that you want (i.e., use positive self-talk and avoid punishments, make a “deal” with yourself, acknowledge all progress)

Use your helping relationships: Communicate clearly what you are trying to do to all the supporters around you. Don’t assume that they will know what you’re needing help with while you’re busy making changes. Take the time to educate them on how they can help you.

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Stage 5: Maintenance

In the Maintenance stage, is not a static stage in which you hold the line against unwanted behavior. Rather, it is another busy, active period of change, one that requires you to learn new coping methods.

Strategy: Work Out the Kinks

- Abstaining is not enough. You must replace problem behaviors with new, healthier ones.
- Maintain your commitment: find a way to regularly remind yourself of the difficulties you have overcome in your early change efforts.
- Take credit for your accomplishment and continue to reward yourself!
- Check your thinking to discover any subtle changes that could lead to a lapse.
- The major threats to maintenance are:
 - social pressures (i.e., friends who engage in the problem behavior or don't recognize its impact on you)
 - internal challenges such as defective thinking (i.e., "I can handle just one")
 - special situations when you are confronted by an unusual, intense temptation (i.e., the champagne toast at your daughter's wedding.)
- Check high-risk situations and develop a plan of attack against them.
- A final pitfall – self-blame: in research studies, the intensity of self-blame is one of the best predictors of relapse.

Helping Relationships:

- Remind helpers to keep supporting and praising you.
 - Help someone else – and it will help you too.
 - Be patient and persistent – this is a lengthy process.
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Stage 6: Termination

Ideally, you will proceed systematically through the cycle of change, moving out of the resistance of pre-contemplation and into the acknowledgment of contemplation, then entering the anticipation of preparation, the flurry of action, and last, the consolidation of maintenance. Few changers actually follow the path so directly: most get sidetracked at one stage or another. However, you may eventually arrive at the point where you feel that you are now free of a long-standing problem. This is "termination," the exit from the spiraling cycle of change.

We have probably all had the experience of giving up a bad habit (sucking your thumb?) and knowing that it's not an issue any more. We also all likely have habits that we know will require at least a little bit of energy to keep them in check. In both cases, part of the **strategy** for success here is **Pat Yourself on the Back!**
