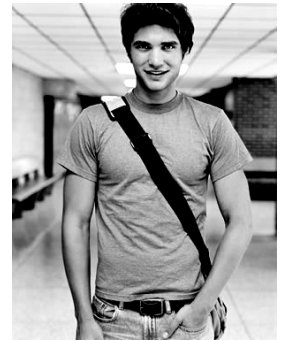


Making Changes

CAN I GET THERE FROM HERE?

The good news is **YES!** We can all make changes so that we behave in ways that support our academic and personal goals and physical, emotional, and mental health. **BUT**, you say, change is unpleasant, unpredictable, risky, scary. That is often true, though change can also be an exciting challenge and opportunity. One of the reasons change is often difficult for us is because we have unrealistic expectations about how change happens. We might have better luck if we understood how change really comes about.



HOW WE CHANGE: FACT AND FICTION

Fiction: All that is necessary to make a change is the desire to change.

Fact: Desiring to change – that is, thinking seriously about making a change - is a necessary step in the change process. However, desire must be combined with a willingness and commitment to act .

Fiction: Once I actually take action, change should be immediate and permanent.

Fact: Change is a **process**. Most of the time we relapse into our old behaviors a few times before permanently adopting new behaviors or a healthier life style.

WHAT IS THE CHANGE PROCESS?

People often think that change is a dramatic, immediate shift from “bad” to “good” or unhealthy to healthy behavior. Many health promotion programs operate under the assumption that people change quickly once they are provided the necessary training and education. For example, advertisements try to persuade us into believing: “Lose two pounds a week while enjoying all your favorite foods!” We may expect that after a 6-week smoking cessation program, a person who has smoked two packs of cigarettes a day for 20 years will become a non-smoker.

The reality is that most people attempting change are not successful on their first attempt. People often try dozens of times before succeeding in maintaining weight loss. Smokers make an average of three or four attempts before permanently quitting. (Norcross and Prochaska, 2002). So, why does it typically take several attempts before we make permanent behavior changes? An explanation has been offered by Dr. James Prochaska, who has examined the process of self-change by studying thousands of patients. What he has found is that there are natural steps that we follow when making changes in our lives.

STAGES OF CHANGE

Pre-contemplation

In this stage, we are not seriously thinking about changing; we may even be defensive about our behavior. We would likely agree with a statement such as “I guess I have faults, but there’s nothing that I really need to change.” Example: A student who often misses assignment due dates, crams for tests, and typically writes a research paper the night before it is due might state that he doesn’t believe in “busy work” and he does his best work under stress.

Contemplation

During contemplation, we acknowledge our problem and seriously think about overcoming it. We would likely agree with a statement such as “I have a problem and I really think I should work on it.” Though we have good intentions, it is common to stay in contemplation for quite a while. Example: A student recognizes and acknowledges the negative impacts her procrastination behavior has on her grades and personal relationships. But, she still has a difficult time using strategies she has learned to better manage her anxiety and her time.

Preparation

It is not unusual by this point to have already tried unsuccessfully to make changes. In this stage, you are thinking deliberately of change and planning to take action toward your desired goal.

Action

During action, which can last up to six months, we have high energy, motivation, and are exerting much effort to make obvious behavioral changes. You may say to yourself "I am really working hard to change. I am doing something about my problem."
Example: A student follows-up on his academic advisor's suggestion to meet with a learning specialist in the Academic Resource Center. He creates semester and weekly schedules, arranges his work schedule so he can attend math tutoring daily, and uses exercise or watching TV as a reward for completing his daily study goals.

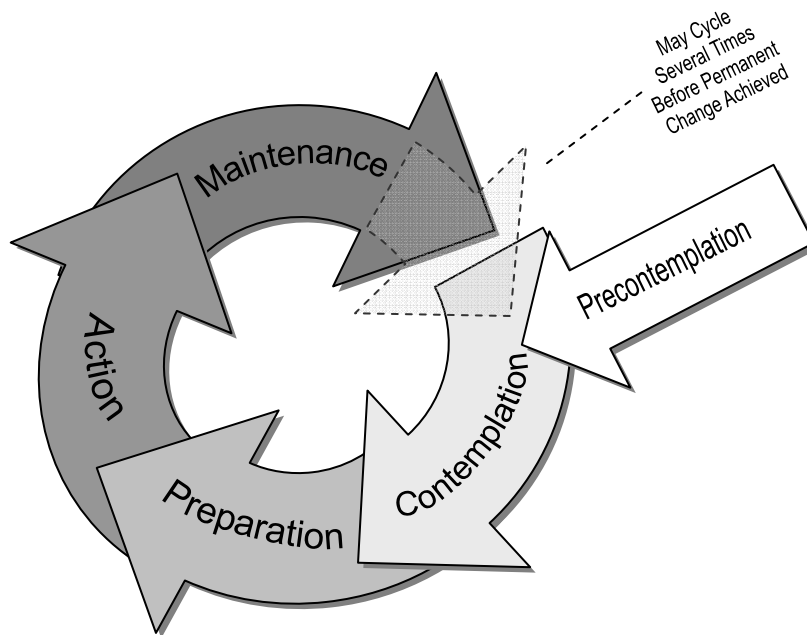
Maintenance

During maintenance, our focus is on sustaining the changes we have made. We recognize that we will need to use effective coping strategies and ongoing effort to maintain our more effective life style. In this phase, it is important to use support systems within and outside of yourself.

Recycling

As stated before, research confirms that we seldom make permanent changes on our first attempt. For a variety of reasons, it is typical to relapse back into our former behaviors. We may feel demoralized or ashamed when we do, but research demonstrates that when we relapse, we do not give up on ourselves or our ability to change. We "recycle" by typically returning to the contemplation or preparation stage to prepare once again for action. The path to change is seldom a straight one!

Example: Faced with several difficult classes that she really doesn't enjoy, a student becomes worried and anxious that she will not be able to pass. She falls back into her procrastination behavior after a few weeks into the semester to cope with her anxiety and self-doubt. After doing poorly on her mid-term exams, she recognizes what she is doing. She schedules an appointment with her professors to get extra help and meets again with the ARC learning specialist to learn effective study strategies.



Prochaska's Stages of Change

Sources:

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