Managing Change:
A Stage-by-stage Approach
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If at any time you want or need help changing a problem behavior, don’t hesitate to contact your employee assistance program or a mental health professional.
“Only I can change my life. No one can do it for me.” — Carol Burnett

We have all at one time or another weighed the pros and cons of a choice with which we were faced. Choosing is hard because saying “yes” to one option means saying “no” to a whole bunch of other options. Making a choice sometimes involves making a change in behavior, and doing so can be hard. But the ability to change, to choose, is part of personal freedom—and a responsibility to ourselves and to others.

Recent theories of change have focused on the process of change as just that: a process. Changing a behavior is not a single event; it does not occur overnight. But rather, behavioral change occurs through five distinct stages. The stages are:

1. **Precontemplation**: having no desire to change
2. **Contemplation**: knowing one should change but not taking any steps toward change
3. **Preparation**: taking the initial steps to change, such as learning more, seeking advice or simply committing to change
4. **Action**: engaging in change behavior
5. **Maintenance**: incorporating changes into one’s daily life

Whether you are considering changing a bad habit, an addiction (e.g., smoking, alcohol, gambling), an aspect of your personal life (e.g., divorcing, leaving a stressful job, ending an abusive relationship), or your lifestyle (e.g., exercising, eating healthfully), this workbook will give you insight into the process of change and provide step-by-step instructions for making healthy, informed and responsible changes.
Are You Ready to Change?

“*It’s not that some people have willpower and some don’t. It’s that some people are ready to change and others are not.*” — James Gordon, MD

Knowing where you are in the change process enhances your chance of success at changing a behavior. This ready-or-not quiz will help you determine your readiness for change, and identify appropriate actions to move you through your current stage and onto the next. Read each statement below and circle the response that best reflects your current thinking on a behavior or habit.

(*Note: This quiz presumes that you are not actively engaged in changing a problem behavior at this time. If you are, please skip to pages 14-18.)

1. Regarding my awareness about this behavior:
   a. Others have suggested that I have a problem behavior, but I don’t agree.
   b. I might have a problem behavior, but I am not sure.
   c. I have a problem behavior.

2. When a loved one or trusted friend suggests that I may have a problem behavior …
   a. I am likely to tune them out, change the subject or get defensive.
   b. I don’t like it, but I know that they see something that worries them and are right in expressing concern.
   c. I am ready to listen and talk about it.

3. This problem behavior …
   a. is really just a nuisance, and I don’t have time to deal with it.
   b. is causing me worry and/or distress.
   c. is causing me, and some of the people I care about, significant worry and/or distress.

4. When I think about my problem behavior …
   a. I usually make excuses, rationalize or minimize its impact on my life.
   b. I want to change, but I don’t because of fear, pride or lack of motivation.
   c. I really want to change, but I don’t know how to begin or continue once I start.

5. Regarding knowledge of my problem behavior:
   a. I know very little about it.
   b. I have begun learning more about it.
   c. I have learned a great deal about it.
6. Regarding my knowledge of resources for my problem:
   a. I don’t know of any resources.
   b. I have learned about some of the resources available but don’t feel I have enough information.
   c. I have more than adequate knowledge about how or where to get help.

7. Regarding my current motivation for change:
   a. I have practically no, or very little, motivation at this time.
   b. I have some motivation to change, but I will need more to succeed.
   c. I am very motivated to change.

8. Regarding my current plans to change:
   a. At this time, I have no plans to change.
   b. I am thinking about change and the impact it would have on my life.
   c. I have a definite plan for change.

9. Regarding my support for change from others:
   a. I have almost no support from others.
   b. I have some support, but it may not be enough.
   c. I have excellent support.

10. Regarding previous attempts to change:
    a. I have never seriously attempted to change this behavior.
    b. I have tried to change on one or more occasions but have failed miserably.
    c. I have tried to change before and have had some temporary success.

Tally your score:

Number of “a” responses: ____ x 1 = ____

Number of “b” responses: ____ x 5 = ____

Number of “c” responses: ____ x 10 = ____

TOTAL SCORE: ____

What does your score mean?

10–15 points
Precontemplation stage: Your score suggests that you are not yet ready to engage in changing this problem behavior. Many people never acquire the motivation or knowledge necessary to move beyond precontemplation. You can learn more about the specific characteristics of precontemplation by reading “Acknowledging the Problem,” on page 5.

16–40 points
Contemplation stage: Your score suggests that you are considering changing this behavior but are not quite ready. People in this stage seek knowledge and additional encouragement before they engage in behavior change. You can learn more about the specific characteristics of contemplation by reading “Resolving Ambivalence,” on page 8.

41–100 points
Preparation stage: Congratulations! Your score suggests that you are preparing to change this behavior. People in this stage have acquired additional knowledge and support and have a viable plan. You can learn more about the specific characteristics of preparation by reading “Preparing to Change,” on page 10.
Acknowledging the Problem

What I don’t know won’t hurt me.

If you scored between 10 and 15 points on the ready-or-not quiz, you are in the first stage of the behavior change process—precontemplation. This stage is tricky and hard to grasp: It’s a little like nailing gelatin to a wall. During precontemplation, the notion of changing a problem behavior is in the unconscious.

So, how can you know you need to change? This section will address some of the “unconscious” signs that may exist in the back of your mind about changing a problem behavior. Also, we’ll look at tips on how to bring the desire or need to change more to the forefront of your mind, into your awareness.

Unconscious desire

Somewhere inside, there is an inkling that you are not as content with your problem behavior as you think. Maybe you tried to stop smoking in the past but failed. Maybe you have tried many times to leave your abusive relationship but have been unsuccessful. You may have become resigned to the fact that “this is just the way it is, I can’t change this.” Or maybe, your boss, your best friend, your spouse or your mother has been “pestering” you to stop procrastinating, stop smoking, stop drinking, stop gambling. You view these suggestions as an inconvenience and an annoyance. For the most part, you may be content with the status quo.

But, at times, you realize that your gambling problem is causing arguments between you and your spouse, and it has caused a problem or two financially over the years. Maybe you have awakened on one too many mornings to an angry or silent partner, and you can’t remember what you did the previous night in your drunkenness to incite such a response. Maybe you see the concern in your children’s eyes as you light up yet another cigarette.

Despite all of this, the notion that you can change has receded so far into your unconscious that it is almost impossible to find. You might be in denial—a refusal to acknowledge the painful reality, thoughts, feelings or consequences of your problem behavior.

Our problem behaviors have consequences for us and for those closest to us. So, it might be time to take a hint from that nagging unconscious, or that pestering loved one. What you don’t know could be hurting you, or someone that you love. Here is what you can do about moving out of the precontemplation stage.

Precontemplation inventory

Your goals are to:

- raise your own awareness of the problem behavior
- consider all the ways in which your problem behavior causes you emotional frustration or turmoil
• consider all the ways in which your problem behavior causes emotional turmoil for your loved ones

Write down your responses to the following questions in the spaces provided.

**Raising your awareness:**

1. What difficulties have you had in relation to your problem behavior? Has your financial, emotional, physical or social life been affected?

2. How has your problem behavior changed over the years? Start from the beginning. When did you start your problem behavior? What was it like in the beginning? When have you tried to stop? Why weren’t you successful? What is the problem like now?

3. What might your life be like if you never change your problem behavior? Conversely, what might your life be like without the problem behavior?

**Gauging your emotional reaction:**

1. What worries you about your problem behavior?

2. What concerns do you have about your problem behavior?

3. Write about the last time you felt distressed over your problem behavior.
Gauging your loved one’s reaction:

1. What about your problem behavior do you think makes your loved one so upset?

2. What do you think concerns your loved one about your problem behavior?

3. How do you think your loved one would feel if you changed your problem behavior?

4. What do you think your loved one’s reaction would be if the problem was not occurring as much?

Moving on

This first stage of change, precontemplation, is a difficult stage to define and understand. Yet, you will know if you are precontemplating changing a problem behavior if one of the following is true:

- you tried in the past to change the behavior and were unsuccessful
- your problem behavior is causing you at least a little bit of distress from time to time (or more often)
- your problem behavior is causing a loved one distress

The precontemplation inventory might help you conclude that you have a problem behavior that you’d like to change. If so, then you are one step closer to making that change. On the next page, “Resolving Ambivalence” focuses on the contemplation stage of change and will help you identify and resolve any ambivalence you feel about changing your problem behavior.
Resolving Ambivalence

“Decision is the bridge between wishing and acting.” — Irvin Yalom

If you scored between 16 and 40 points on the ready-or-not quiz, or have moved through the precontemplation stage described in “Acknowledging the Problem,” you now are in the second stage of change, contemplation. The contemplation stage is defined by the experience of ambivalence. You have decided that you will change your problem behavior; you just haven’t yet mustered up the motivation. Maybe you have been in this stage for months or even years.

You know you are contemplating changing a problem behavior if you:

• can acknowledge that you have a problem behavior
• wish that you could change the behavior
• feel stuck by fear or ambivalence

All in all, you are no longer content with the status quo. It might not feel like it, but this is a positive place to be—because your denial is gone.

So, how can you commit to finally changing that problem behavior? This section will address some of the ambivalence you may have and will offer some tips to move you forward.

Ambivalence
The contemplation stage of change is filled with ambivalence. You are being pulled in opposite directions—your wish to change and your fear of changing.

Fear about change can take many forms. Some people fear the prospect of failing. Some fear the prospect of doing something new. And some fear that the changes they make won’t be accepted by their close friends and family members. Even though you know you want or need to change a problem behavior, it is still very scary to change.

All of your fears are real, and you should take a considerable amount of time to contemplate your fears during this stage. But be careful. Your fear could overtake you, and you could become “stuck” in this stage of considering changing and, consequently, never make the decision to change.

Contemplation inventory
Your goals are to:

• consider the advantages of changing your problem behavior
• develop resolve in your intention to change
• develop optimism that you can change your problem behavior
Write down your responses to the following questions in the spaces provided.

**Advantages of change:**
1. If you changed, what would your new life be like?
2. If you changed, what would your life be like five years from now?
3. If you could make this change immediately, by magic, how might things be better for you?

**Optimism about change:**
1. What encourages you to think that you can change if you want to?
2. When else in your life have you made significant change like this? How did you do it?
3. What personal strengths do you have that will help you succeed?

**Intention to change:**
1. What do you want to have happen?
2. How important is this to you? How much do you want to do this?
3. What would you be willing to try?

**Moving on**
The contemplation inventory might help you resolve your ambivalence about changing. If so, then you are one step closer to making that change! On the next page, “Preparing to Change” focuses on the preparation stage of change and will help you develop the plans that you will need to be successful in changing your problem behavior.
Preparing to Change

“You are the sole creator of your experience.” — Luke Rhinehart

If you scored 41 to 100 points on the ready-or-not quiz, or have moved beyond the contemplation stage described in “Resolving Ambivalence,” you now are in the third stage of change, preparation. You are committed to changing, you are motivated, and you are ready to get started. Your enthusiasm is growing; in fact, you have told your closest friends and family members about your intentions to quit smoking, quit drinking or start exercising. You may have even asked them for advice on how they beat that nasty habit. You may have called Alcoholics Anonymous or Overeaters Anonymous to find the closest meeting, or even contacted your behavioral health care company to get referrals to a counselor. You are willing to try anything!

However, back up for a moment—before you quit cigarettes cold turkey or take that five-mile run. Making change without preparing for change can lead to feelings of frustration, stress, and, possibly, failure. This section will show you how to create a detailed plan of action to increase the likelihood of effective change. You are, after all, the sole creator of your plan, your success and your life!

Planning

It is important at this stage of change to get a firm grasp on exactly what constitutes a plan. You have planned many other things in your life, such as weekends, vacations, a wedding. To do so, you took certain steps in the planning process for each of those events. For example, you decided to take a vacation, thought about what type of vacation you wanted, researched necessary information to fulfill your idea of the perfect vacation and developed your final itinerary. More than likely, you kept thorough notes on all your planning efforts to stay organized.

Planning change is really no different than planning a vacation—except there is a lot more at stake.

Preparing to change inventory

Your goal is to:

- consider all your options
- develop a plan of action

Write down your responses to the following questions in the spaces provided.

Brainstorm options

- What have you heard others say about what has worked for them? Will any of their suggestions work for you? Why or why not?
• What have you considered doing? What have you tried in the past? Why didn’t it work?

• What is the craziest thing you can think of to do to bring about this change? Conversely, write down the opposite of what you might normally do. Consider whether there is any validity to these options.

Once you have brainstormed the many options to help you change your behavior, develop and write down a list of resources that will help as you create your plan and move forward into action. Some of those resources might include: the name and phone number of a friend who has stopped drinking; a friend who has recently joined a gym or a local weight loss program; the toll-free number to your employee assistance program (EAP); your medical doctor’s number; and so forth. Keep these handy as you move into the next phase.

Resource list

Plan your itinerary (create a plan of action)

1. Set concrete goals. Remember that a goal is much more than simply stating your intention, “I want to stop procrastinating,” or “I want to feel better.” Your goals should follow these guidelines:
   • Make them realistic; this is the golden rule for avoiding failure.
     Not: “I will be a millionaire by the time I’m 50.”
     Instead: “I want to save 10 percent of my annual income.”
   • State them positively: You want to achieve success; not avoid failure.
     Not: “I will quit eating junk food.”
     Instead: “I will take care of my body by eating five servings of vegetables every day, and limiting junk food to one serving a day.”
   • Make them measurable; so you will know when you have achieved success!
     Not: “I will lose weight.”
     Instead: “I will weigh within three pounds of the weight that is appropriate for my body type.”
2. **Create the specific steps you will take to reach those goals.** Revisit the list of options and resources you developed during the brainstorming phase. Choose the options and resources from this list that make the most sense for you. For example, if your goal is to lose some weight, and you can accommodate $30 in your monthly budget, then you might consider joining a gym. If not, then you may want to ask a neighbor or your spouse to walk with you either before or after work. These options will become the specific steps that you take to reach your goal. These steps also should be realistic, positively stated and measurable.

**An example**

You decide for the New Year to focus on losing weight.

**Goal:** I will weigh within three pounds of the weight that is appropriate for my body type.

**Objective 1:** Develop a program of exercise.
- Step 1: Walk for 30 minutes, three times per week for four months.
- Step 2: Walk for 45 minutes, three times a week after four months.
- Step 3: Introduce light weightlifting with hand weights after eight months.
- Step 4: Continue this pattern until exercise becomes a habit.

**Objective 2:** Develop healthful eating habits.
- Step 1: Keep a food diary for two weeks.
- Step 2: If necessary, cut sweets and fats in half.
- Step 3: If necessary, increase daily fruit and vegetable servings.
- Step 4: If necessary, balance the food groups in my daily diet.
- Step 5: Cut restaurant portion sizes in half.
- Step 6: Revisit this plan in six months.

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**Turn the page and create your own plan of action.**
Your plan of action

Goal:

Objective:

Step 1:

Step 2:

Step 3:

Resources:

Moving on
The existential psychologist Irvin Yalom defines self-fulfilling prophecy as “… first expecting a certain event to occur, then behaving in a way as to bring the prophecy to pass.” Creating a plan for change is behaving in a way as to believe that your plan will come to pass. Now that you have created your detailed, specific, realistic and concrete plan of action, it is time to move into the fourth stage of change, action, featured in “Making it Happen.”
Stage four of making behavior change, the action stage, is where all the thinking and planning are finally put to the test. At this point, you’ve contemplated and prepared to make a behavior change by creating a plan of action. You are ready to take a step such as:

- going to counseling or treatment
- attending a 12-step program or support group
- starting a diet or exercise program
- taking a class to learn a new skill
- being assertive in a difficult matter
- quitting a stressful or unhealthy job
- attending church, synagogue or mosque

Action, as the name implies, is when someone who has been contemplating change engages his plan behaviorally, meaning he actually does something different. Whether you want to lose weight, quit smoking or reach another goal, here are some ideas for acting on your plan and achieving success.

**Good intentions versus action**

Engaging an action plan is no small thing. If changing a behavior were easy, everyone would do it. Taking that big step and actually changing a behavior is truly a breakthrough. Why? Because too many people remain stuck in the contemplation and planning stages for months, years or, sometimes, forever. For example, 70 percent of smokers report that they desperately want to quit smoking and have good intentions to do so—some day. But the gulf between good intentions and actually quitting cigarettes is very wide and difficult to close.

Many people remain stuck in the contemplation stage because they are comfortable being stuck and/or change just seems too difficult. Some may announce plans to change a problem behavior because they attain temporary psychological relief: At least they have recognized their problem and acknowledged that change is needed. Moreover, it gets their friends and loved ones off their backs, if only temporarily. Others procrastinate and persistently avoid engagement due to a number of real or concocted external reasons. For example, “I’ll quit after the holidays,” or “I’ll quit when things are less stressful at work,” or, “It’s just not a good time now; I’ll quit after my daughter’s wedding,” and so forth.

**What moves you to change?**

The reasons for moving from contemplating change to action are important and should be acknowledged and incorporated into the action plan. Here is an example:

_Doris gained 50 pounds during her last pregnancy. After the delivery, she fully intended to lose the weight and get back into shape. However, three years later, Doris remained about 30 pounds overweight. Because_
she had initially told herself that she was going to lose the weight, she didn’t pay much attention. Besides she was busy raising two children. Doris was shocked into action when she saw herself in her cousin’s wedding photos. She had no idea that she looked so fat. That was the impetus necessary to jumpstart Doris’s plan into action. That photo, which she promptly duplicated, is now permanently affixed to her bathroom mirror and to her refrigerator. This photo serves as a visual reminder of the motivation it took to move from contemplation into action.

Reviewing your precontemplation inventory (see page 5, “Acknowledging the Problem”) can be very helpful in sustaining change, especially when the going gets tough. Keeping the reasons for behavior change close at hand will bolster motivation. The first step of Alcoholics Anonymous is a good example. It reads: “We have admitted that we are powerless over alcohol and that our lives have become unmanageable.” Members of AA read this at each meeting because remembering the pain associated with problem drinking reinforces their commitment to change.

**Involving others for support and accountability**

The action stage often is preceded by a pronouncement or commitment to trusted friends or family members regarding a decision to change, specific strategies or treatment and a request for support. Doing so is a very positive move because it adds support and accountability. Knowing that others are watching, cheering one on and holding one accountable decreases the likelihood of relapse. For example, if an individual announces to her family and friends that she is on a low-fat diet, it’s much more difficult to eat high-fat foods in the house or when out to eat with friends.

**Engaging change**

Review the plan of action that you created as you were preparing to make this change. This plan includes the realistic, positive and measurable goal(s), as well as the specific steps you will take to reach the goal(s). It is now time to take that first outlined step. To stay on track, remember to:

- Ask for specific accountability and support from others. For example:
  - Pick a small support team of individuals you trust.
  - Arrange regular contacts or check-in times with your support team.
  - Give your team permission to ask tough questions about your commitment.
  - Arrange time to relax and unwind with friends and family.
- Be honest with yourself and others about your progress and setbacks.
- Set up short-term rewards with your support team. For example:
  - Go out for a nice dinner after one week of not smoking.
  - Purchase new clothes after losing 10 pounds.

**Keep moving forward**

Changing behavior and sticking to a plan is hard so don’t get discouraged by minor setbacks and give up. For example, if you decided to lose 30 pounds by exercising for 30 minutes each day—good for you. But if you only manage to exercise four days of the week rather
than seven, doing so is still far better than not exercising at all. In other words, goals are good and necessary, but don’t get discouraged when you fall short. Learn from your setbacks, make adjustments and keep moving forward. It will be worth it.

When you have successfully incorporated this behavior change into your lifestyle, you are considered to be in the “maintenance” stage of the change process, covered in “Sustaining the Effort” on the next page.
“Nobody trips over mountains. It is the small pebble that causes you to stumble. Pass all the pebbles in your path, and you will find you have crossed the mountain.” — author unknown

Congratulations on reaching the final stage in the process of making a behavior change! Your preparation and commitment to following your plan of action have paid off. The maintenance stage of the process of making behavior change—stage five—is typically considered to be the downhill leg of the change process. This is a bit of a misnomer, particularly for those dealing with chronic problems such as addictions or overeating. The word “maintenance” implies a passive approach to sustaining change. Although it is true that a small percentage of individuals who have successfully come through the action stage report that they no longer have a desire to, or face temptation to, engage in their problem behavior, the vast majority of people report a significant risk for relapse. Here are some helpful strategies for maintaining change.

From action to maintenance
Although no clear line of demarcation separating the two stages exists, experts suggest that maintenance occurs when the behavioral change has been successfully integrated and accommodated into one’s lifestyle.

For example, going on a low-carbohydrate diet in order to lose 20 pounds is very difficult at first, requiring a lot of cognitive energy to learn which carbs are good and which carbs are bad, and so forth. Once one learns the ropes, finds a tasty low-carb diet and incorporates it into one’s lifestyle, it doesn’t require so much thought. In other words, the person can “just do it.”

For recovering alcoholics, a sign that they have entered the maintenance stage is when attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings becomes enjoyable—a regular and welcome part of their weekly routine.

Preventing relapse
There is no cure for most problem behaviors. Consequently, the potential for relapse is very real and must not be underestimated.

Think of relapse as a process and not an event. In other words, relapse includes identifiable thoughts and feelings that, if avoided, inexorably lead to engaging in the problem behavior again. Self-deception is the common thread in most instances of relapse.

Consider a recently recovering compulsive gambler, Jim, who has not wagered in four months. At Gamblers Anonymous he has learned that he should avoid people and places associated with gambling. However, Jim is feeling very confident in his recovery, so much so that when he is invited to a low-stakes poker game for a friend’s bachelor party, he tells himself that he can handle it. Within minutes of arriving at the party, Jim is overwhelmed by a desire to gamble. He tells himself that he will gamble “just to be social” and sets his...
loss limit at $10. By the end of the night, he has lost more than $250. The story illustrates that relapse occurs the moment one breaks even a little rule or tells oneself a little lie.

**Signs and symptoms of relapse**

- increased feelings and perception of stress and feeling overwhelmed
- pretending things are OK when they are not
- self-pity
- isolating from supportive people
- feelings of anger or entitlement
- skipping treatment sessions or support meetings
- feeling overly confident
- poor sleep
- overworking

**Strategies for maintaining change**

Maintaining behavioral change is about more than avoiding relapse. It also involves taking a proactive approach. Here are some helpful strategies for maintaining change:

- Review goals, accomplishments and any setbacks each week.
  - Be honest with yourself about your progress and setbacks.
  - Keep a private journal of your thoughts and feelings about your life as you journey through the change process.
  - Look for ways to improve your plan—ask others.
- Stay in touch with your support team.
  - Periodically assess the level of support and accountability you need and adjust accordingly.
  - Disclose newly discovered relapse triggers or risky situations immediately.
  - Ask for specific feedback on how your team perceives your progress and attitude. Does anything concern them?
- Learn more about your problem behavior. Consider attending a workshop or conference.

**Acceptance**

Acceptance is perhaps the purest outcome of the maintenance stage. This is the spiritual aspect of the change process and the one that is hardest to define and measure. Acceptance is that place you come to when you realize that you really had to make a change and, that you will be all right. The “Serenity Prayer” sums up the change process eloquently and succinctly:

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

If you are struggling with maintaining a change, revisit the previous stages in your process by reviewing “Preparing to Change” and “Making it Happen.”
Contributors
Drew Edwards, EdD, MS
Frances Hughes, PhD, LPC, NCC

Source