

Managing Change: Acknowledging the Problem

You may not be considering changing, or acknowledging a problem or the need to change. You may feel relatively happy with your smoking, overeating or drug habit. You may be largely unaware of the consequences of your choice to stay in your abusive relationship, for example, and you may not really be into learning more about the consequences for yourself or your children. For the most part, you may be content with the status quo. You “can’t,” or rather, don’t want to, rock the boat.

Stages of change

Recent theories of change have focused on the process of change as just that: a process. Change is not a single event; it does not occur overnight, but rather, change occurs through defined stages.

The first stage in the behavior change process—precontemplation—is a tricky one. It’s a little like nailing gelatin to a wall. This stage of change can be hard to grasp. During precontemplation, the notion of changing a problem behavior is in the unconscious.

So, how can you know you need to change? This article 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.

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 sit at the breakfast table hacking up a lung while lighting up 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.

Questions to ask yourself

It is important to take an 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

Make this an actual inventory by writing down your responses to the following questions in a precontemplation journal entry.

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? Alternately, 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! Congratulations!

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.

Source: *Changing for Good: A Revolutionary Six-Stage Program for Overcoming Bad Habits and Moving Your Life Positively Forward* by James O. Prochaska, John C. Norcross and Carlo C. DiClemente. Morrow, 1994.

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