

Managing Change: Making It Happen

So, you've contemplated and prepared to make a behavior change by creating a plan of action. You probably 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

Whether you want to lose weight, quit smoking or reach another goal, here are some ideas for acting on your plan and achieving success.

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 action stage of making behavior change is where all the thinking and planning are finally put to the test. Action, as the name implies, is when someone who has been contemplating change engages his plan behaviorally, meaning he actually *does* something different.

Good intentions versus action

Engaging an action plan is no small thing. If changing problem 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," etc.

What moves you to change?

Therefore, 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 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 is often 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. This is a very positive move because this 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 a week of not smoking for one week.
 - 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, it 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.

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.

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