

Managing Change: Preparing to Change

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

Once you have decided it is time to change a problem behavior, you might begin making small acts of preparation. You might call Al-Anon, Alcoholics Anonymous or Overeaters Anonymous to find the closest meeting. You might contact your behavioral health care company to get referrals to a counselor. You might even wake up one morning and throw out your carton of cigarettes or all the junk food in your cupboard. These are small but sure signs that you are in the preparation stage of change.

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.

In the preparation stage of change 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, or to start exercising. You may have even asked them for advice on how they beat that nasty habit. 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 article 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 wrote notes about all of your planning because that kept you organized.

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

Things to do

Take time to write a “Managing Change” inventory. Your goal is to:

- consider all your options
- develop a plan of action

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

Do your research

- 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? Alternately, 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 problem 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. Keep these handy as you move into the next phase.

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 handle my decisions regarding finances in a more constructive manner."

- State them positively; you want to achieve success, not avoid failure.

Not: "I will quit eating junk food."

Instead: "I will be more conscious of what I feed my body."

- Make them measurable; so you will know when you have achieved success!

Not: "I will lose weight."

Instead: "I will weigh within 3 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 have an extra \$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 should also be realistic, positively stated, and measurable.

An example

You decide for the new year to focus on losing weight.

Goal: I will weigh within 3 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 3: If necessary, balance the food groups in my daily diet.

Step 4: Cut restaurant portion sizes in half.

Step 5: Revisit this plan in six months.

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.

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.

Sources: *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; *Existential Psychotherapy* by Irvin D. Yalom. Basic Books, 1980.

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