



Stages of Change

Based on *Changing for Good* by Prochaska, et. al. (2010 edition)

Since the late 90's, James Prochaska, PhD and his colleagues have conducted thousands of different studies and involved more than 30,000 individuals to discover how people overcome problems as varied as smoking, alcohol abuse, emotional distress, weight control, and others. It's been tested, revised and improved through empirical studies and is being used around the world. Illness care establishments that use the model include the Centers for Disease Control, the National Cancer Institute in the US, the National Health Service in the UK, and Johnson & Johnson.

Prior to this revolution in how we see change, the old action paradigm was often steeped in assumptions that tended to promote shame. Even among the helping professionals, if patients or clients failed to maintain the recommended actions, they were blamed for lack of willpower or motivation, or labeled "resistant." Of course, we know how important our view of our client is in establishing a safe space for change.

Dr. Prochaska and his colleagues were the first to consider what wasn't working in the old model instead of looking at the deficiencies of those who wanted to change. They asked the question, exactly what happens for successful self-changers? What is their process? What works?

They discovered six predictable stages in the change process, each calling for particular and different approaches to change.

The Stages

- **Precontemplation:** People are not intending to take action in the foreseeable future, usually measured as the next 6 months. Even if others are encouraging them to change, they do not see the need. They may not even perceive a problem. Most precontemplators don't want to change themselves; they usually want to change the people around them.
- **Contemplation:** People are intending to change in the next 6 months. They are thinking about changing and assessing the problem (habit) and its benefits. This is where you bring both your rational mind and the emotions into play to move yourself to a commitment to change. It is also here that you explore your ambivalences to change. One of the best tools for doing this is either the Decisional Balance Scale (in Required Reading, Class 4) or a simple costs/benefits analysis of either the old behavior/pattern or the new one (we'll discuss this in class).

- **Preparation:** People are intending to take action in the immediate future, usually measured as the next month. This is where you remove temptations, plan how action can be taken, and arrange support and understanding from family, friends, support group or professional. You also arrange substitutes for the missed habit or activity or substance. Beware substituting a new problem (over-eating, over-spending) for the old. If you feel hesitant in this stage, you probably will need more work in Contemplation. When I've coaching, if I see someone procrastinating or holding back in this stage, I'll suggest and discuss why more work in Contemplation may be the wisest strategy. Most people express relief at this.
- **Action:** People have made specific overt modifications in their life styles within the past 6 months. This is the stage most of us picture. It's the actual practice of the new way of being.
- **Maintenance:** People are working to prevent relapse, a stage which is estimated to last from 6 months to a lifetime. Many people benefit from learning the difference between a lapse and a total relapse, (a complete collapse back into the old way), which is more appropriately called "recycling" (see below). Recognizing a lapse and taking immediate action can save the effort. As always, the goal is not some ideal of perfection but rather just being in learning mode, in present time, so we can self-correct more rapidly and easily.
- **Termination:** Individuals have zero temptation and 100% self-efficacy... they are sure they will not return to their old unhealthy habit as a way of coping. Depending on the desired change and the person, total termination of the problem behavior may not occur. Instead, there may be a lifetime of careful maintenance. In other cases, the problem is conquered and temptation to renew the poor behavior ceases. Confidence that one has really succeeded peaks after a year but temptation may continue for two or three years.
- **Recycling:** In addition, the researchers have re-conceptualized "relapse" as "recycling" which is not a stage in itself but rather the "return from action or maintenance to an earlier stage." It is entirely usual for a person to fail at one stage or another, and then to make a subsequent attempt that succeeds. For example, most people who quit smoking report three or four serious attempts before they succeed. And serious New Year's resolutions typically are made for five consecutive years or more "before resolute changers achieve the maintenance stage." The researchers found that action followed by relapse is far better than no action at all.

Why is this Important?

Coaching is results-oriented. The goal is to help our clients to attain their goals. It's our job to do this in the most effective way possible.

Dr. Prochaska and his colleague researchers found that in representative samples across more than 15 high-risk behaviors, fewer than 20% of the population is prepared for action at any given time. But more than 90% of standard change programs are designed with this 20% in mind. They are geared only for those who are ready for the action stage.

But what happens to the remaining 80% who aren't ready?

The answer is simple. They attempt change and then recycle usually feeling shame and a loss of self-efficacy. They sometimes fall into depression and apathy for long periods of time. In time they will usually re-emerge and try again with a new program or method to approach the change. However, if they are not properly prepared, it will likely be the same thing all over again.

I've had clients who, prior to asking for my help, have unsuccessfully attempted a change up to a dozen times and are so despondent they really don't even believe they can change. When I explain the Stages of Change to them, it all makes sense to them. I usually hear a deep sigh of relief as the shame drops away. They understand that they have just recycled because they haven't prepared and given themselves the support they need. They aren't hopeless failures! Because of the shame, they haven't been in learning mode so they can make adjustments to their approach. I've had quite a few people cry uncontrollably as they discharge the shame and self-doubt while this new understanding fills them with hope. This is no small thing. The simple awareness can carry huge implications for a person's life.

My purpose in introducing this model to you is primarily so you will understand the importance of supporting yourself in the stage you are in and to allow yourself to develop fully and not pushing yourself to the next stage prematurely. If you push yourself into a stage of change you are not prepared for, it will backfire on you, and you will recycle. When you are ready, you will most likely move naturally to the next stage. You don't need to push.

The other side of the equation is that if you spend more time than is necessary working on tasks you have already mastered--such as in Contemplation when you are working on understanding the problem--you can delay the process. I've had clients who have become quite comfortable in Contemplation and need some kind and clear challenges to help them move forward and realize that they are capable of changing.

Think of the stages as periods of gestation in any growth process. A plant develops in its own time and produces fruits and seeds when it has had the necessary nurturance of air, sun, water, and healthy soil. Attempting change wisely means understanding what will likely be nurturing in the stage you are in.

We often don't move through the stages in a nice, neat progression. Think of the stages as general descriptions of what people naturally do in the change process. There's a lot of flex in how that happens. We can be in Action or Maintenance and want to revisit aspects of Contemplation or Preparation to support ourselves.

When asking yourself what stage of change you are in, remember that you can be working on more than one thing at a time. Say you want to 1) intentionally build your breathing awareness and also 2) decrease the amount of sugar you eat. You can be in Contemplation in #1 and Preparation in #2. So when you ask yourself what stage of change you are in, it is looking at a specific change.

Also, your goal may be to lose weight, but to do so the changes you've decided you want to implement are 1) to decrease your portions at each meal, 2) increase how much you move or exercise, and 3) to drink more water. You can be in a different stage of change for each of those actions. By noticing the stage you are in and thinking about how you can support yourself right where you are, you will spare yourself a lot of recycling and shame, be able to be in learning mode more easily, take small steps in the direction you want to go and, in the

long term, achieve much more than if you tried pushing yourself and feeling bad when you couldn't stay with it.

What we are talking about here is one of the mechanisms of how we achieve balance with our Self-Responsibility & Love, the most primary foundation of wellness.

The Processes of Change

(Also see the article of the same name in your Required Reading)

Within each of the stages we use various processes to support ourselves to gestate fully within that stage. The research found that the more processes we use as supports, the more likely we will make the change permanent. It's been my experience that when we recycle, it's often because we are just relying on one or two processes when we may need much more support to get over a hump.

The processes are descriptions of strategies geared to affect change. Within each process of change are untold numbers of techniques. Any activity that we initiate to help modify our thinking, feeling, or behavior is a change process. The 9 Processes of Change that Prochaska and his colleagues have discovered are a way to speak about the broader strategies rather than getting lost in the thousands of techniques that may be useful.

The 9 Processes of Change are:

1. Consciousness-Raising
2. Social Liberation
3. Emotional Arousal
4. Self-Reevaluation
5. Commitment
6. Countering
7. Environmental Control
8. Reward
9. Helping Relationships

Here is an expanded summary of the Processes of Change with some examples of techniques within each process. Some techniques can be supporting more than one process. Coaching is a methodology that is useful pretty much across the board. The techniques mentioned here are not by any stretch of the imagination exhaustive.

1. Consciousness-Raising

- Goals: Increasing information about self and problem
- Techniques: Observations, confrontations, interpretations, education, coaching individually or in group settings

2. Social Liberation

- Goals: Increasing social alternatives for behaviors that are not problematic
- Techniques: Advocating for rights of repressed, empowering, policy interventions

3. Emotional Arousal

- Goals: Experiencing and expressing feelings about one's problems and solutions

- Techniques: Coaching, Psychodrama and other kinds of therapies, grieving losses, role playing, motivational activities to raise desires (books, audio or video recordings, attending speeches, classes, or workshops, creating a vision board, etc)

4. Self-Reevaluation

- Goals: Assessing feelings and thoughts about self with respect to a problem
- Techniques: Values clarification, imagery, corrective emotional experience, especially the Being (wants) part of a coaching session

5. Commitment

- Goals: Choosing and committing to act, or belief in ability to change
- Techniques: Decision-making process, New Year's resolutions, public sharing

6. Countering

- Goals: Substituting alternatives for problem behaviors
- Techniques: Relaxation, desensitization, assertion, positive self-statements, thought-watching, Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, inquiry processes like Byron Katie's 4 questions, Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT)

7. Environmental Control

- Goals: Avoiding stimuli that elicit problem behaviors
- Techniques: Environmental restructuring (removing temptations), avoiding high-risk cues, changes in social network

8. Reward

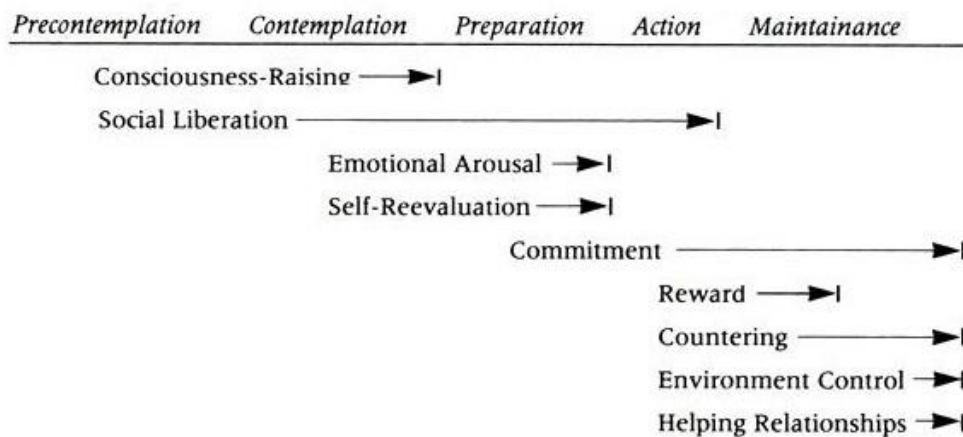
- Goals: Rewarding self, or being rewarded by others, for making changes
- Techniques: Contingency contracts, overt and covert reinforcement

9. Helping Relationships

- Goals: Enlisting the help of someone who cares
- Techniques: Coaching, therapy, social support from friends and family, self-help groups (in person or virtual)

You'll probably notice that some Processes of Change are useful in some Stages of Change but wouldn't be that useful in others.

TABLE 3. STAGES OF CHANGE IN WHICH PARTICULAR CHANGE PROCESSES ARE MOST USEFUL



Please don't take this table too literally. Obviously, Helping Relationships are valuable throughout the entire change process and when you are in Action, you may still be using Self-Reevaluation or Emotional Arousal to keep motivated until the new healthy habit is well-established. The researchers found evidence that the processes were most effective in specific stages of change. For instance Consciousness-Raising and Emotional Arousal is heavily relied upon by those in Contemplation. Self-Reevaluation begins in Contemplation and is critical in Preparation.

The research suggests that the success rate for permanent change tends to go up when people are offered two choices of how to pursue change rather than just one. It goes up even more with three or more choices. This is all predicated on your motivations for change. When you are clear about why you want to change and have resources for then making the change, you have the winning combination.

Evidence emerged showing that it may be more efficient to use the processes with more than one problem at a time. There is a complimentary piggy-backing effect that happens. But the challenge is to find your "sweet spot" where you are generating movement but not trying to do too much, which will overwhelm you and bring up fear. Usually a small steps approach will succeed when trying to make big steps have not. (For more information about this, please either read *One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way* – Recommended Reading – or listen to the interviews with Dr. Robert Maurer in Class 4 and Class 5 in the Interviews with Wellness Experts section. You can also find them in your Training Library.)

Can you see why the Wellness Inventory combined with taking the time to really explore what matters (the Being phase of a coaching session) works so well? Taking the Wellness Inventory and seeing in graphic detail what aspects of your well-being you most want to change, then drilling down into what matters most and what about that is important, is a powerful lighting of the "fire in your belly" -- that which propels you forward. Then moving forward with small, doable steps, within the stage you are in, will more reliably help you to achieve what you want than trying to take big steps that just send you into a recycling and shaming tailspin.

Who is Doing the Changing?

All this information is interesting, but in studying categorizations, techniques, and theories, we can run the risk of losing sight of what is actually happening when someone changes.

“No therapy is any more successful than the change strategies that determined, persistent, and hardworking individuals develop for themselves.” -- James Prochaska, Ph.D.

I love this quote because it recognizes the importance of the following:

“People will tolerate your ideas, but they will act on their own.” – Randall Root

You can learn from the research and experiment with this information, but never forget that it's your client's agenda, it's their life, and it's their solutions that matter. You are their partner to support them in discovering what will work for them.

There are literally thousands of approaches that will work. Yes, having many skills in your toolbox can be very useful, but what the research has shown is that “the vast majority of people who change never visit a helping professional or participate in an organized program. They cope with their difficulties themselves, using their own capacities and resources, drawing on others for support, and developing strategies based on hard experience.”

Being a good partner to smooth the way is the most effective thing you can do. Yes, do suggest tools you have in your toolbox, but don't get seduced into thinking that you are affecting change in your clients. It's nothing but their hard work that does it, and their courage to experiment with the techniques until they find what will work best for them. To try something new is a courageous act because they are risking failure, disappointment, and shame each time they are willing to step outside what is known and comfortable. You have the privilege of partnering with them, holding the space safely and witnessing their repeated courageous acts as they move through what is frequently the most difficult thing they have ever done.