

# **STAGES OF CHANGE**

So....you want to make some changes. Most of us, at one time or another in our lives, reach a point when we know—way down deep inside—that something in our lives has to change, and that WE have to be the ones to change it. Be it spiritually, mentally, emotionally, or physically, the status quo is no longer satisfying our needs, and it's time to do something about it. When it comes to our self-image, it is often a grueling and difficult task to make change, however, because the thoughts that have “fed” our behaviors for so long are deeply ingrained in our psyches, and the habits of thought are hard to break.

Psychologists Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente, among others, have developed a theory about the process of change, and the process by which we can be effective at implementing change in our lives. This model is called the Transtheoretical Model, and involves a number of steps by which people have been professionally and successfully treated and taught to manage their problem behaviors through behavior modification. As you read, ask yourself where you are in the process of change, and what obstacles are standing in your way from reaching the next level, and ultimately success.

**1. PRECONTEMPLATION.** In this stage, a person is unaware that he or she has a problem, or is under-aware of the problem. There is no expressed desire to make any changes, and no real concern or immediacy for anything to be different. If asked, we might say that things are fine, and that if nothing is different a year from now, it would be okay. Others around us may think we have a problem, or may be concerned about us, but we don't see their need for concern, or simply don't care. In terms of weight loss, when in this stage, we are comfortable with our weight, eating habits, health, and activity level. We don't notice any real problems related to our bodies and are in a state of what is commonly referred to as “denial.”

**2. CONTEMPLATION.** In this stage, an individual has become aware that there may be a problem, and has begun considering doing something about it. An overweight person may notice that he or she is out of breath when walking a short flight of stairs, or notices that his or her clothes don't fit the way they used to. He or she realizes that his or her health may be in jeopardy, and is beginning to “wish” that things could be different. When in this stage we often talk about how we really should lose weight. We should go to the gym. We should say no

to chocolate super fudge brownies. We should eat more fruits and veggies. We should...we should...we should...but we don't.

**3. COMMITMENT.** In this stage, we have become more than aware that we have a problem. We are motivated to do something to change it. Our health is at risk. We don't like ourselves. We are self conscious. "Darnit," we say. "I can't take it any more. It's time to do something about this." We go beyond saying "I should" and begin saying "I will." Interestingly, this is a difficult stage to get to. We often enter this stage and commit to change only when the alternative is no longer tolerable. The thought of NOT changing is unbearable. We can't stand being out of shape any more. We are sick of the way we feel about ourselves. We are sick of watching life instead of participating in it. It is in this stage that change—and progress—are born.

**4. PREPARATION.** So we've decided to change. Perhaps we've decided to lose weight, or be more active, or change our eating habits, or stop telling ourselves negative thoughts. So how do we go about doing that? We need a plan. We brainstorm. This is our "could" stage. We think of every possible alternative and resource. We could join a gym. We could hire a personal trainer. We could eat nothing but lean cuisines. We could go on a grapefruit diet. We could exercise an hour every day. They may be realistic, or downright crazy, but we're brainstorming. We look at our options, and we choose the ones that will work for us. We prepare for battle. We buy the workout outfits with the matching headbands. We invest in expensive home gym equipment. We buy unproven supplements from professional looking models on tv. We rid our homes of dangerous temptations. We devise a plan, and are intent on following it through. We are ready.

**5. ACTION.** We've committed. We've prepared. We are physically, emotionally, and spiritually ready to embark on a journey by which we will improve our lives. And we follow our plan. The action stage is the "I am" stage. I am working out 3 days a week. I am following a sound nutrition plan. I am catching myself and the negative things I say to myself about food and my weight. I am feeling better. I am proud of myself. I am doing. I am acting responsibly. I am changing and I feel it. This stage, when engaged consistently, will result in the changes for which we have prepared and desired for so long. Is it easy? No. Is it always fun? No. Does it take a great deal of motivation, support, desire, and tenacity? Yes. Is it worth it? Yes. If you stick to it, will it happen? Yes. The key is to enjoy the doing as

much as the results of doing. Take pride in the fact that you are behaving better. You deserve respect. You're doing more than most. You're way ahead of where you were in the game back when. The secret is to keep doing. It takes a week or less to form a bad habit; it takes at least 30 consistent abstinent days to break one. Give yourself time to form good habits that will last you long after you've reached your weight loss goal. Just keep doing.

**6. MAINTENANCE.** Whew! You've been working out. Your clothes fit differently. You feel proud when you look in the mirror. You hold your head higher. You have more self confidence. The danger of this stage, after we've made some big changes, is that we slide into complacency. We're no longer so uncomfortable that we **MUST** change, and we are at high risk for relapse into past unhealthy and ineffective behaviors. Research shows that people who are able to maintain healthy changes for a minimum of six months have a great chance of success. If we can maintain—not the weight, but the behaviors that have helped us lose it—then we are on our way to lifelong changes. All those good habits that were hard for us at times—working out, watching what we eat, encouraging ourselves, getting support from others—have become part of our lifestyle. It's just what we do, and the alternative is not an option.

When we have gotten to the point where we have implemented healthy lifestyle **BEHAVIORS** into our daily living, and continue to engage in those healthy behaviors regardless of the fact that we have reached a weight loss goal, it is **THEN** that we will have been truly successful at changing for life. When it becomes unthinkable to **BEHAVE** differently, then we will have reached the point where weight is no longer the focus of our goals, and will no longer be a source of low self-esteem. After all, we will be managing our lives in a way that demands respect from others, and it will show not only in the fitness of our bodies, but in the confidence and pride with which we greet the world. And **THAT** is where real success is measured.

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