

Health

September 9, 2007

Tired of trying to make changes but not reaching your goal?

One of the hardest things to do is to watch ourselves or others try to make changes and “fail” (in our own eyes, at least). Many people think that changing behavior is about taking a specific action to change a specific behavior that then disappears. So, if you need to lose weight, the idea is that you aren’t serious unless everyone can see you shed pounds. Or, to “prove” that you are serious about stopping smoking, you must never pick up another cigarette. In other words, we often believe that in order to prove that change is occurring, it has to be visible action and result in the end of an undesirable behavior. The problem is that research has shown us that behavior change is very different and includes a multistage process through which we all pass.

The Stages of Change model developed by James O. Prochaska shows that, for most people, a change in behavior occurs gradually and progresses through five stages. The first two stages primarily involve emotional and intellectual changes that take place within the individual. The last three stages involve action that is more visible. Depending on which stage you are in, each stage has very specific interventions to help you move forward. By learning where you are in the stages of change for a specific behavior, you can help yourself get past your own “stuckness” and help loved ones be more successful in achieving their goals.

These are the five stages of change, each with its own specific characteristics and strategies. Keep in mind that you might be in a different stage for each of your behaviors (e.g., exercise, eating habits, smoking, drinking, losing weight, emotions, etc.).

1. Pre-contemplation (“No way, I can’t, I won’t”): In this stage, there is no intention of changing the behavior. Resistance to recognizing, modifying or even discussing the problem is common, and you may feel that warnings about health consequences don’t apply to you. A frequently heard comment at this stage is “Get off my back.” The problem is usually identified by loved ones or doctors who recommend a change.

Strategies to move forward: Don’t try to force action; just consider the possibilities. Think about the problem and remember that the choice is yours. Gain information about the pros and cons of changing; identify how the behavior affects you now and how it may affect you in the future (positively and negatively).

2. Contemplation (“I may start, just not today. I’m not ready”): Right now you may be aware of the problem and be seriously thinking about taking action in the next six months, but you aren’t sure if you want to make the commitment because it seems like more work than it’s worth. Don’t be surprised if you feel ambivalence and fear about giving up the behavior, even though it causes problems for you or others.

Strategies to move forward: Focus on the positive benefits of the change and ask yourself these questions: How will not changing affect your health in five years or 10 years? How will it affect your family? What were the reasons for not changing? What are the barriers today that keep you from change? What things (people, programs and behaviors) have helped in the past? Continue to weigh the pros and cons and let the message guide you.

3. Preparation (“I will or have made small, initial attempts to change”): You have decided it’s time to change, and you would like to do so in the next month. You experiment with small changes and see the benefits of change as outweighing the reasons for not changing.

Strategies to move forward: Create an action plan on paper with clear, realistic goals (e.g., “I want to exercise three times a week by the end of this month”). Start small and build: Each success brings motivation and energy. Identify and develop skills you need to reach your goals. Create a plan to deal with obstacles. Get support from your friends and family.

4. Action (“I am successful at making the change, but have been doing so for less than six months”): You have implemented your action plan and are ready for change!

Strategies to move forward: Identify alternative healthy behaviors to substitute for unhealthy behaviors. Reward yourself for all the hard work you are putting in to create change. Continue to use support from others to keep you motivated. Keep at it: Your old behavior did not begin overnight, so don't expect it to go away overnight.

5. Maintenance (“I have been successful for at least six months”): Continue using the previous strategies and identify what works for you. The behavior change may be easier now, but you may still have obstacles that have to be dealt with.

Strategies to move forward: The hard work is paying off - give yourself some credit! Keep the action plan in mind and continue doing what works for you. When obstacles arise, deal with them according to the plan you set up. Don't forget the benefits of the new behavior.

Finally, remember, if an obstacle overcomes you, it does not imply failure. Rather, it provides us with an opportunity to learn how to maintain change more effectively in the future. Each time we learn from our challenges, the journey toward change becomes easier and we gain confidence in our ability to change.