



STAGES OF CHANGE: Not an All-or-Nothing Proposition

When people decide to make changes in their lives, whether that means working to solve a problem, to stop doing one thing, or to start doing another; there is often an assumption that most people actively commit to the change process once they decide. Interestingly, research that has been done on the process of change shows a fairly typical progression of steps that people go through before they are ready to fully commit to the change process.

This research was done by two psychologists, James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente. Their large-scale studies suggest that people progress through several predictable, well-defined stages on the way to their desired change, and are apt to take resolute action only near the end of the process. This means that only a small percentage of people are ready to actively resolve their difficulties at any time. The five stages of change they discovered are as follows:

Precontemplation: In this initial stage, individuals are largely unaware of their problems and have no intention of changing their behavior. People in this stage typically do so in response to pressure from others — a spouse who threatens to leave, an employer who threatens to terminate employment, or a judge who threatens jail time are all examples of external motivators for change. People in the precontemplation phase often wish *other* people would change, as in, “How can I get my partner to quit nagging me?”

Contemplation: Contemplators are aware that they face problems and internally want change to occur. They are seriously thinking about grappling with their problems usually within the very near future and often within the next six weeks. At this stage, however, they have not yet made a commitment to take action, usually because they still feel daunted by the effort required to overcome the problem, or because they still feel positively about some aspect of the behavior they want to change. For example, Prochaska and DiClemente followed 200 contemplators who were considering quitting smoking, most of them were still “thinking about it” two years later.

Preparation: Individuals at this stage intend to take action within the next month. People in the preparation phase may have already made some small attempts to modify their behavior — such as trying relaxation exercises when feeling anxious, or working out at home to a video — but these attempts typically have been sporadic and only partially effective. They may be developing strategies for a more committed program of change, such as mapping out an action plan, going public with their intention to behave differently, and getting social support.

Action: In this stage, individuals are taking concrete steps to change their behavior, experiences, or environment in order to overcome their problems. People in the action phase endorse statements such as, “Anyone can talk about changing, but I am actually doing something about it.” Because action often brings up feelings of guilt, failure, coercion, and craving for old behavior, people typically need a lot of support during this period. A sobering statistic: **At any given time, only 10 to 15% of people in the process of change are engaged in the action phase!**

Maintenance: During this stage, people work to consolidate their gains and prevent relapse. For some problems, maintenance might last a lifetime. This is probably the case with most addictive and impulsive behaviors as well as with some mood disorders, like depression. Remaining free of the problem and behaving in ways incompatible with the problem — such as engaging in positive self-talk or calling a friend when one begins to feel blue — are key signs that a person has reached this stage.

Here are some ideas to support you or others you may know who are thinking about or in the process of change:

- Don’t assume that everyone is at the Action Phase of the change process, or even wants to be.
- Find out which of the Stages of Change is accurate and work from there.
- Anticipate moving backward as well as forward through the stages.
- Go slowly and choose a system of support that is appropriate for the Stage of Change.
- Honor every Stage of Change as an important and integral part of the whole process.

Adapted from:

Lebow, J. (2002). Transformation now! (or maybe later): Client change is not an all-or-nothing proposition. *Psychotherapy Networker*. January/February 2002. pp. 31-32.

Prochaska, J. O., DiClemente, C. C., & Norcross, J. (1995). *Changing for good*. New York, NY: Avon Books.