

WHAT IT IS

One approach addressing the often frustrating and challenging process of encouraging an individual in crisis to change their current behavior lies in the work of Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente. Their book *Changing for Good* is powerful, with universally helpful concepts when answering the question, “Why is it so hard for people to change their behavior?” Their approach outlines how people move through various stages before becoming ready to make lasting changes in their lives. This can help give a sense of perspective and understanding about why someone may repeat difficult or frustrating behaviors. Change theory is often taught as part of alcohol educational classes to help people make the connection between wanting to change and accomplishing this change in their lives.

This process focuses on five stages of change: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation for action, action, maintenance, and relapse prevention, as described below. At this point, stop and think about a behavior you tried to change in your life, perhaps smoking, watching too much TV, or not getting enough exercise. Consider how you progressed through the stages of change.

WHO TO USE IT WITH

Those struggling with making changes in their lives, perhaps those who have tried to change their behavior but became frustrated when they could not change bad habits as quickly as they would like. This approach is most helpful for those already at the contemplation or action stage, as they will be more receptive to following the approach and creating change in their lives.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. Think about something you want to change in your life. What stage of change are you currently in?
2. What obstacles have gotten in your way when you have tried to change a behavior and have been unsuccessful?
3. Have you had success changing a behavior? What helped you be successful in making that change?

TEACHING INSIGHTS

For each stage of change, understand your task to help the individual.

1. **Pre-contemplation:** Help individuals increase their awareness of their need for change through discussion. Help them understand how their behaviors may impact their life.
2. **Contemplation:** Motivate the individual and encourage them to think in detail about how their behavior negatively impacts their life. They should explore ways to plan for change and what resources could help implement it.
3. **Preparation for Action:** Plans and goals should be focused, short-term, and designed to be updated and altered to ensure success. Plans should be measurable and something the individual can monitor and understand if they are moving forward, static, or moving backward. Help them brainstorm and update their plans to ensure a better chance of success.
4. **Action:** Support the individual in trying out these action steps and encourage them to keep trying despite setbacks and the potential failures they may encounter.
5. **Maintenance and Relapse Prevention:** Help bolster the individual’s success and develop an awareness of potential obstacles that could lead to relapse.

Think about a behavior that you would like to change in your life. This could be related to eating healthier, showing up on time, getting to the gym, or addressing unhealthy behaviors in a dating relationship.

Change theory helps us understand the process of change and how we can successfully achieve change in our lives. The five steps of this approach are outlined here:

- 1. Pre-contemplation:** You are unaware that there is a problem or thing to change, and you haven't thought much about change.
- 2. Contemplation:** This is the most common stage of change. You have thought some about changing a behavior and are getting ready to take steps to change soon. You realize your current behavior is not good for you, but you aren't quite ready to begin to take steps to change.
- 3. Preparation for Action:** You are aware of a problem and ready to actively create goals to change your bad habit or behavior.
- 4. Action:** You have put your plans into action. You are actively trying to alter your negative behaviors and develop new positive behaviors to replace them.
- 5. Maintenance and Relapse Prevention:** You are either successful or need to re-evaluate your plan. If things are working well, you are in maintenance. Continued success depends on repeating those action steps that work while adjusting things that don't. If change is slow or difficult, look for ways to overcome obstacles and reduce the risk of falling back into bad habits.

When you think about the behavior you have tried to change (or are trying to change), think about the stages above and write where you currently are in the change theory steps.

