

Stages of behaviour change

According to the ‘stages of behaviour change’ model, the following six steps make up the complex process a person uses to change their habits and behaviours and integrate changes into their lives.

1. Pre-contemplative/unaware
2. Contemplative
3. Preparing
4. Action/trying
5. Maintaining
6. Termination/advocacy/transcendence

1. Pre-contemplative/unaware

In this stage, people are not interested in change, can’t see the need to change and have no intention of doing anything differently. They defend their current behaviour and are not aware that their life could be better. This group does not see falls as a real issue for them. This group tends to avoid information, discussion or even thought about change and the need for it. Some observers would characterise this group as ‘resistant’, ‘unmotivated’, or ‘in denial’ and not focussed on the need to change or the actual change itself [176].

2. Contemplative

In this stage, people start to think about the issue and the possible need to make some changes. They recognise that there is a problem and that they can and should do something to make their lives better. There may have been a trigger event like an older person who is a friend or neighbour having had a bad fall or there may be some other form of prompt that starts the process of considering change. For example, people could be motivated to get their eyes checked or have a medication review. This group is now beginning to see that their behaviour needs changing. People in this group are often seen as procrastinators and ambivalent, however what they are actually doing is weighing up the pro’s and con’s (including the costs and benefits) of any possible behaviour change. Giving up an enjoyed behaviour causes them to feel a sense of loss despite the perceived gain. At this stage, people are very open to information and scour sources for options and strategies [173].

3. Preparing

A change is about to happen. The person concerned has realised how serious their situation is, has made a decision or a commitment to change and is currently completing any 'pre-change' steps with a view to making the required change within the next month. An example would be finding out details of local physical activity classes and working out which public transport option to use. This stage is also an information gathering period. This stage is typified by determination, making plans, introspection about the decision to change as well as a reaffirmation of the need and desire to change. This is typically a period of transition. It is not seen as a stable time and is usually quite short [175].

4. Action/trying

This stage applies to those people who have made real and overt changes or modifications to their lives and are starting to live their 'new' life. While the chances of relapse and temptation are very strong, there is also openness to receiving help and support. This stage is the 'willpower' stage and short-term rewards to sustain motivation are commonly used. This group is also prone to analyse any behaviour changes to enhance their self confidence and to help make better plans to deal with either personal or external pressures. Usually, after about six months, the person moves from the action stage to the maintenance stage [176].

5. Maintaining

By this stage, people are working to consolidate any changes in their behaviour, to maintain the 'new' status quo and to prevent relapse or temptation. The former behaviour is now seen as no longer desirable and a number of coping strategies have been put in place and are working. This group needs to be patient and avoid personal and environmental temptations. There is a need for them to remind themselves of the progress that has been made already and to stay on the course of change. The risk of lapsing is substantially less than in earlier stages [178].

6. Termination/advocacy/transcendence

This stage was added to the model by researchers seeking to build on the initial work of Prochaska and DiClemente. This ‘new’ stage is the continuing part of any behaviour change and includes the understanding that going back to old habits or behaviours would ‘feel weird’ and that former problem behaviours are no longer perceived as desirable. This stage can also have an element of advocacy about it with some people committed to spreading the word to their neighbours, family members or the public at large. This sort of advocacy plays an important part in helping move other people along the behaviour change path and needs to be encouraged and supported. During this stage, relapse can occur, but it is not seen as a failure but rather as a learning opportunity to help strengthen coping strategies and support mechanisms [175].

Citation: Health Promotion Unit, 2007. Stages of behaviour change: Queensland Stay On Your Feet® Community Good Practice Toolkit. Division of Chief Health Officer, Queensland Health.