

# Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

## Stages of Change

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## "The Times They Are A-Changin'"

Back in the 1960s, Bob Dylan wrote a song entitled "The Times They Are A-Changin'." Many of you may remember that song, although some of you reading this may not have even been born yet. I can remember singing that song in coffeehouses at a time when many felt that change was needed and welcome. But the fact is that even when change is needed, it is often not welcomed. This is true whether we are talking about individual change, change in our families, our business, our leaders, or almost any other area of our life that we can imagine. Even changes that we would see as desirable do not happen without some ambivalence on our part. This even applies to making changes that we know would improve our life, our health, or our emotional well-being. As this happens to be the month of January, many of you have vowed to make some of these changes in the form of New Year's resolutions. For that reason, I thought that it might be helpful to look at the process of change and how we can best carry it out.

Whether we are talking about starting a new exercise program, wanting to expand our intellectual horizons by taking a new class, or even trying to be more involved or helpful around the home, making changes tends to involve certain steps. Step one is called "*precontemplation*." This step generally involves an individual's denying that there is a problem at all, and she has no intention of changing her behavior. Although others may see the problem quite clearly, and frequently remind the individual about it, the individual primarily sees it as a problem of others and frequently feels simply hassled by the world around them.

Step two has been called the "*contemplation*" phase. At this point, the individual may acknowledge that he has a problem or that there is something he needs to change, and he begins to think of ways to possibly solve it. For example, someone who has been told by his family physician, or perhaps his spouse or loved one, that perhaps it would be better for his heart, blood pressure, and cholesterol to lose a few of the pounds he has accumulated over the years or at least to begin exercising for cardiovascular fitness. Now let's face it, that just doesn't sound like fun at all for most of us. But the "contemplator" of change may start to think about how his life might be better were he to carry this out, and he would also begin to look at some possible solutions. The struggle in the contemplation phase is knowing where you would like to go, possibly knowing what you have to do to get there, but still not being quite sure that you are committed to doing what it would take to get the job done. Some may stay in this phase for years.

Step three might be termed the "*preparation*" phase, which is characterized by two changes in one's thinking from the contemplation phase. First, you realize that your current game plan of what you have been doing is not working, so you begin thinking more about solutions rather than just the problem. Second, you begin to think more about the future and how things might be better and different than you do dwelling on being stuck in the past. In general, individuals in the preparation phase are planning to begin making changes in their behavior in the relatively near future, either in days or weeks, and are making final plans on how to do that. Ambivalence can still be very strong in this phase, and it must be remembered that no one changes without this ambivalence. The problem with change, even if one wishes to change from a clearly bad situation or behavior to one that seems obviously better, is that change still represents an unknown. Even when we are involved in bad situations, we at least



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know how "the rules" work in that situation and are familiar with them. That is one of the reasons that frequently in therapy change can be so difficult, as even in getting better emotionally one may be entering what feel like "uncharted waters," which can be rather frightening.

Step four is termed the "**action**" phase. It is during this phase that people actually begin to change their behavior and at times their surroundings. The latter is frequently crucial as so often our behaviors are positively or negatively affected by our surroundings. You may want to talk to someone who has accomplished the change you are working on and find out how they were able to do it. You may need to hire someone, whether it is a music teacher to learn how to play the piano or guitar, a physical trainer, or perhaps signing up for course at a local community college. Although this phase frequently involves a good deal of activity, this activity alone will not make completing the change successful. For example, you may join a fitness club and buy all kinds of neat outfits to work out in, but you must continue going to the fitness club and exercising (not just enjoying the whirlpool or sauna) to actually improve your level of fitness. This is why the next phase is so important.

Step five, the "**maintenance**" phase, is where you begin to really make some of these behavior changes a part of your life and of your new habits. It has been said that one must repeat a certain behavior at least seven times to make it a habit, although my experience has been that this grossly underestimates how hard it is to instill new behavior patterns into our lives. No matter what behavior change we are attempting to make, the changes will not be made perfectly. There will be lapses and relapses, but the trick is to not berate yourself for the lapses, but rather to remind yourself why you want to make the change and what the benefits will be. It is important to understand what some of the triggers may be for relapse, whether it be boredom with the new behavior, negative thinking as you anticipate not being able to keep it up for ever, or simply the idea that "missing one day at the gym won't hurt anything," until you find yourself using that rationale day after day. For many, changing a lifestyle pattern with an accountability partner can be very helpful.

In dealing with stopping certain behavior pattern, such as a particular habit or addiction, researchers have also labeled a step six, which is often called the "**termination**" phase. Here the previous behavior pattern theoretically will no longer present a significant temptation or threat to return and often with the idea that during this phase little ongoing effort on your part will be required. In essence, the change has been made, and the new behavior is now part of your life. I personally have some qualms about this phase being present unless there is very little prior history of the previous behavior that is being changed. For those attempting to change a behavior pattern that has been there for a long time, it has been my experience that if you let your guard down too much and spend little time remembering why you made the change in the first place, it is frequently only a matter of time before the old behavior will come back and "bite you."

Although these phases have been clearly delineated in research involving all types of change, it must also be remembered that progression through these phases is not linear and constant. One may tend to go back and forth in these phases, particularly the earlier ones, but understanding what some of the tasks are and where you may be at regarding the changes you are contemplating making will hopefully be helpful. Like it or not, it has been said that one constant in life is that things are always changing. Perhaps one way of viewing this process is that "life is always a-changin'," but it is the individual's responsibility to do what he or she can do to make sure that the changes are positive and are accomplished to the best of one's ability. And good luck in making that New Year's resolution and "all year's resolution."



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