

Stages of Change

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It is hard to believe that it is already April. Many resolutions were made four months ago in January, some more realistic than others. Spring is a very good time to start gardening, exercising outdoors and preparing fresh seasonal produce. Some changes come naturally.

There is no better time than now to “check in” and “check up” on the changes that still need to be made this year for this season. If you vowed to make changes in January and they haven’t come about, this is the time to “dig a bit deeper” and ask “why not”?

There is a “model for change” based on findings that people go through at least six stages on their way to making sustained changes in exercise and eating habits. If you have ever tried to change an eating or exercise behavior, these stages will feel very familiar. You may “find yourself” in one of these “Stages of Change”. You may need to challenge yourself, educate yourself and learn new skills to move from one stage to the next.

Stage One is pre-contemplation. In this stage one usually does not realize there is a problem or concern. Perhaps you haven’t worn shorts all winter and don’t know how snugly they fit. Maybe your walking partner has been walking without you for the last few months while you have been extremely busy at work. You may deny that you have missed walking and may not see this as a problem. There is simply an absence of awareness of a problem or risk.

Stage Two is contemplation. In this stage one realizes the need to make changes in behavior. If you are still thinking about the pros and cons of beginning a particular weight management or exercise program, you may be in this stage. The awareness is there, but there is a feeling of ambivalence or feeling “stuck”. If this stage is lasting six months or more, know that it is time to get moving and get a check up.

Stage Three is preparation. In this stage, one experiments with small pieces of the puzzle of behavior change. If you try a new recipe, workout with a tape or dabble with new equipment, you are most likely in this stage. You may have been in a weight management and/or exercise program before, and you plan to take action within the next month. You are planning to do more. You are making appointments for a physical, with a dietitian and/or personal trainer, or you are

signing up for a program.

Stage Four is action. In this stage one takes concrete steps to address problems, but behavior change is not consistent. You are trying to change by drinking a lot of water, eating healthier foods and starting a walking program. You make some mistakes and keep on trying to change.

Stage Five is maintenance. In this stage a new behavior is maintained over time.

You have learned from your mistakes which has increased your chances of success in the future. If you have been successful with a weight management program that has integrated changes in eating behaviors and exercise plans, you are most likely in this stage. You are generally free of problem behaviors and engage in new, healthful habits.

You accept and commit to new behaviors as part of daily life and routine. You understand vigilance is required and are understanding with yourself.

Stage Six is either termination or relapse. Termination means that you have complete confidence in your ability to maintain behavior change in many situations. You have learned a new set of skills and are mastering them. If one goes into a relapse, one goes either partially or fully back to old behavior patterns. When a relapse occurs this is often accompanied by negative feelings. Emotional eaters use food to regulate their mood. People with emotional eating issues usually need further coping skills and require reinforcement with relapse prevention.

If you are stuck in a negative behavior pattern, you may simply be in Stage 1, 2 or 3.

It is often helpful to consult with a professional who can guide you to the next step.

Setting achievable goals with a system of accountability is part of the process of moving through each of the stages. People within the same family or work group can be in different stages. This is why an assessment of "where you are" with any particular behavior pattern is so important in helping you embark on the next step. These behavior patterns may be very personal as they are tied to habits that you have had for a very long time.

Knowing what to do such as "eat less" and "move more" is very different than applying

the process of (ib)how to(ie) "eat less" and "move more" in every day life. Often an old pattern must be broken to make way for newer healthier ones. Motivation and time are necessary to create new constructive patterns.

For many years weight management programs have expanded education to include techniques from the field of behavioral psychology. More tools are available than ever to help you in your unique process of change. Teaching you to 1) assist in self-monitoring your food intake, 2) improve your exercise habits, 3) track your body mass index/waist circumference and 4) alter your environment to avoid problem foods while 5) setting realistic goals are on your registered dietitians “to do” list. Are they on your calendar for April?

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