
Center for Integrative Oncology and Survivorship

The Stages of Change

Excerpted from the article by Jessie Sholl, "Prochaska's Stages of Change," which appeared in Experience Life Magazine. For a full version of the article, visit experiencelife.com/article/the-stages-of-change.

Break a habit. Achieve a goal. Transform your life.

At one time or another, most of us have embarked on an effort to change some part of ourselves or our lives. We've decided to stop smoking, to start saving, to drop a few pounds, or to get a new job. As a rule, these sorts of changes don't occur overnight. They take time and effort. And they tend to evolve through a multistage process—one that many behavior-change experts know as the Transtheoretical Model of Change, or TTM.

Conceived in the early 1980s by psychologist James O. Prochaska, PhD, this theoretical tool (sometimes referred to as the "readiness-to-change" model) has encouraged many to rethink their assumptions about the most effective, appropriate ways to support themselves in accomplishing their goals.

Prochaska's Transtheoretical Model acknowledges that lasting change generally proceeds through six key stages: from *Precontemplation*, to *Contemplation*, then to *Preparation* and *Action*. But that's only the beginning, and we can easily coast right back into preparation or contemplation if we lose our nerve, focus or steam.

For our behavior change to prove sustainable, it must enter a *Maintenance* phase (generally, six months or more of consistent action) until it finally becomes ingrained as a stable habit. This final, ongoing phase is known as *Termination*, which implies that the change is now a permanent part of our lifestyle.

Want to be more successful in making the changes that matter to you? Here's a detailed look at the stages of change, and how you can move through them with confidence.

Stage 1: Precontemplation

People in this stage may wish to change, but for the immediate future have no plans to do so. Why? They may not be fully aware of all the potential benefits, or they may feel disinclined to try because of past failed attempts, or a lack of available energy.

"In Precontemplation, people underestimate the benefits of changing, and overestimate the cons, or costs," says Prochaska. "But they're not particularly conscious of that, so it's not a focused, rational decision-making process."

Weighing the pros and cons of a behavior is an important component in the Transtheoretical Model. In the beginning, the apparent cons tend to outweigh the perceived pros. As a person moves through the six stages, however, that balance shifts.

You're in the Precontemplation stage if: You've heard plenty of times (from your doctor, your spouse, your friends, or maybe your own conscience) that you should make a change—but you're not seriously considering doing anything about it anytime soon. It may seem like too much work, or just plain not for you. When someone tries to talk to you about it (e.g., cutting back on drinking, losing weight, giving up cigarettes), you tune out, shut down or change the subject.

Moving from Precontemplation to Contemplation: It may take a scary test result or a major life event (such as the birth of a child or death of a loved one) to get you motivated to start thinking differently about your prospects for change. Meanwhile, recognize that "just thinking about it" has potential value, too, and can help open your mind to new possibilities.

Stage 2: Contemplation

Those in the Contemplation stage are thinking about taking action, but aren't quite ready or don't know how to get started. Contemplators often think they might make the behavior change within the next six months, and they're open to information and feedback. In this stage, the pros and cons of potential change feel about equal.

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You're in the Contemplation stage if: You're no longer opposed to making a change in your life, but you're still sitting on the fence. Your ears may perk up when you hear someone talking about related subjects. And while you're not actively searching for information or supportive resources, when you happen to stumble across them, you take a look. You're gaining the confidence to imagine changing, and becoming more aware that it might very well be worth the effort.

Moving from Contemplation to Preparation: This is a great time to do the low-commitment work of envisioning your better self and your better life—perhaps journaling or making a “vision board” that represents the change you'd like to accomplish. It's also a good time to recognize that if you have been thinking about change for a while and not doing it, there's probably a reason: You may lack some of the necessary skills, knowledge or confidence. You may be concerned about the prospect of leaving behind familiar patterns. If so, reaching out for the support of a coach, mentor or counselor could be very helpful. Hearing the first-person accounts of others who have already made this change can be inspiring and reassuring, too.

Stage 3: Preparation

People in the Preparation stage are getting ready to take action. They are more decisive, confident and committed; they're developing a plan and may have already taken small steps. At this point, the pros of making the change clearly outweigh the cons—but there's some work to be done before meaningful action can take place.

You're in the Preparation stage if: You're actively gathering information, support, maybe even gear and supplies—and feel nearly ready to take your first steps. You're feeling motivated to learn the skills that will help you be successful in making this change. You're inclined to accept appropriate support, and you welcome invitations and incentives to participate in activities that will move you forward.

Moving from Preparation to Action: This is when you sign up for that class, attend a support group, buy a health club or yoga studio membership, or bring home a pamphlet for services that will help you make the change you desire. If you're determined to eat healthier, this might be when you start clearing the junk food out of your pantry and stocking up on wholesome stuff. Any initial steps—even if they are experimental—move you that much closer to Action and the sense of momentum that comes with it. Ask yourself: What, if anything, do I need to do to embrace this change in my life and be prepared for the obstacles I'm most likely to encounter?

Stage 4: Action

Beyond just thinking about it or preparing to act, a person in this phase has actually begun doing something (or a lot of things) differently, and may be experimenting with expanding his or her efforts. Even if the changes are small so far, he or she is building momentum, knowledge and self-confidence, all of which encourage continued action.

“This stage is where all those small steps, small choices and mini sacrifices make a huge difference,” notes master certified life coach Kate Larsen, author of *Progress Not Perfection: Your Journey Matters* (Expert Publisher, 2007).

You're in the Action stage if: You're implementing your action plan. Perhaps you ate your first healthy meal, completed your first round of workouts, or got through your first few days or weeks as a nonsmoker. Congrats! Now you just have to keep going.

Moving from Action to Maintenance: Prochaska's model specifies that after six months of consistent action, you transition into Maintenance. Getting to that point mostly involves doing whatever keeps you strong, motivated and focused. Finding ways to integrate your chosen behavior change into your social life and sense of identity can be a big help.

Stage 5: Maintenance

Individuals in the Maintenance stage have managed to stay in Action mode for at least six months. That means they've successfully avoided or overcome the obstacles that could have caused them to slip back into old behaviors. Through practice, they've attained a greater level of confidence and capacity. Their new behaviors have started to become a more integrated part of their lifestyle and identity, and their risk of relapse is much lower than when they began.

Yet several things can trigger people in Maintenance to relapse: stress, crisis, apathy, boredom, a loss of environmental or emotional support, or a frustrating plateau in progress. Major life events—like a job change, romantic breakup, location change, birth or death in the family—can also trigger a relapse.

You're in the Maintenance stage if: For at least the past six months, you've been diligent and consistent in performing the actions you committed to as part of your desired behavior to change. They now seem fairly routine.

Moving from Maintenance to Termination: Treat obstacles and unanticipated challenges as opportunities to develop new strengths. Ward off boredom by taking on new challenges and expanding your skills. Stay on the maintenance path for two years or more, rallying even through stresses and setbacks, and you'll reach a point where you can't really imagine ever going back to the way things were before.

Stage 6: Termination

When people in the Maintenance stage continue their healthier behavior for at least two years, they enter into Termination (sometimes also referred to as “Adoption”). In Termination, the behavior change is completely integrated, and the temptation to revert to the former behavior is entirely gone. This element of behavior change is no longer something you have to “do”—it's just who you are.

You're in the Termination stage if: After two years or more in Maintenance, you've been at this long enough that it now doesn't seem like “behavior change” at all. It's just the way you live—an integrated, almost effortless part of who you are. You've likely become adept enough at the required skills and awarenesses that you've learned how to apply them in new ways, perhaps to new goals in other parts of your life. You're confident enough now in this realm that you may even coach or mentor others in making the changes you've mastered.

Enjoying Termination: The whole point of mastering the art of behavior change is to create the life of your highest choosing. Successfully integrating a chosen lifestyle change is a clear indication that you have the skills to do that. Look for new ways you can leverage those skills. Explore how you might use the strength, self-knowledge and wisdom you've gained to undertake new areas of challenge or learning, and to be of service and support to others.

You now know a secret that few fully appreciate—that there's more to creating change than meets the eye, more than those who like to invoke the “just do it” imperative may care to admit.

“Too often,” says Prochaska, “we've presented people with a false choice: Take immediate action, or do nothing. And those are bad choices for most people. If they take action and they aren't ready, half will fail. And if they don't take action, they'll continue with their unhealthy lifestyle.”

The better choice? Start where you are, take the steps forward that are appropriate for you now, and then just keep on going.

The Six Stages of Change		
1.	Precontemplation	“I am tuning you out.”
2.	Contemplation	“I'm listening and considering the benefits of change.”
3.	Preparation	“I have a plan to start.”
4.	Action	“I started and can see some benefits.”
5.	Maintenance	“I have been doing it for six months.”
6.	Termination/Adoption	“I have changed for good.”