



HOW TO UNDERSTAND YOUR READINESS FOR CHANGE - THE FIVE STAGES OF CHANGE

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The reality is, change is a constant in our lives, the question is, how are you dealing with it and in what stage of change are you? The only thing that remains a constant is change. Understanding your readiness for change by identifying the stage of change you might be in can help you choose the best course of action to move forward to success.

There is a framework that describes the stages we go through when we seek changes in lifestyle. It can be very helpful to know which stage you find yourself in, especially if you desire to make a change in career, relationship, health and fitness, or any other significant area of your life. The number one reason people seek the assistance of a personal professional life coach is because there is something in their life they want to be different...they want something to change.

It is important to understand that change does not happen overnight or in a vacuum apart from process. Just as every action is preceded by an attitude, change is preceded by a series of steps or stages. These stages are distinct, predictable, and identifiable. Simply by determining which stage of change you're in can be the impetus to helping you move forward and succeed.

Psychologists in the late 1970s and early '80s developed this model of change in their study of how smokers stopped using cigarettes. Thus, it is a behavior-based model that can be applied to nearly any behavioral change you desire to make. Keep in mind, lasting change happens not just when you are able to change a behavior but when you are able to change the thinking that underlies the "bad" behavior you're seeking to change. That said, it is still very useful to understand the process and the cognitive components associated with each stage.

1. Stage One – Pre-Contemplation

In this stage you are unaware that a potential problem even exists or, if you are aware, you are disinterested in doing anything about it. People in this stage are often pessimistic and negative about their ability to change, so they may ignore a potential problem or deceive themselves into believing they don't have a problem. (Note the thinking process happening here.) There may be "selective filtering" going on or justification and rationalization of the status quo. The dissonance created from the awareness, in relationship to the lack of action, causes people to find ways of supporting their position that "nothing is a

problem.” Denial is a primary trait of people in this stage. It can be a very lonely and frustrating stage to be in because deep down, you know things can/should be different.

Likewise, it can be difficult to reach people at this stage. Their justification becomes the reality and the “truth” of their lives, as they frequently see little to no hope for themselves. Often the incentive to move to the next stage is a significant emotional trigger, a reality check like a serious health issue related to the problem. While the event that snaps people out of this stage can be painful, it is also incredibly powerful and can often result in people jumping right from Stage 1 to Stage 3. Chances are good that, since you’re reading this, you’re not in Stage 1.

2. Stage 2 – Contemplation

Here, people are aware of a problem or challenge they face, they’re unhappy about the situation but not yet ready to move forward toward making a shift. In Stage 2 people often find themselves weighing the costs of making the change they *think* they want to see. “What will my going through the process of making this change cost me in terms of time, energy, effort, or finances?” People in Stage 2 are contemplating whether it will be “worth it” to make the change. A better question to ask yourself is, “What will it cost me if I **don’t** make this change, in terms of energy, piece of mind, joy, contentment, confidence, and finances?” What is it worth to you to have peace, confidence, joy, and a positive attitude? What are you willing to pay to have the life you want to live and be the person you know you’re designed to be?

Unfortunately, people can remain in Stage 2 for years without preparing or taking serious action. It is important for those in this stage to visualize the life they want to have or would have if this change were made. Often, people need help in identifying new ways that making the change could benefit them, seeing how the benefits outweigh the costs. It is human nature to seek pleasure and avoid pain. But the more pleasure you can ascribe to making the change, the more likely you’ll be to take action and succeed. Again, note the mental and thinking perspectives at play in this process.

3. Stage 3 – Preparation

It is at this stage that people are ready to commit to making a change. They’ve had it, they’re done wasting time, money, and energy are now emotionally invested and ready to move forward. Often, those in Stage 3 are eager to make a change and commit to very short timeline, desiring negative habits and positive change happen quickly. There’s a good chance this is the stage you’re presently

in, as it is the stage most common for those who determine to hire a professional life coach. If this is you, congratulations! You're on your way to changing your life for the better. There is work involved but the rewards waiting for you on the other side are priceless.

4. Stage 4 – Action

Obviously, this is the point in the process where actual behavioral and lifestyle change happens. This is where critical “self-talk” cues are shifted, perceptions change, and perspectives become clearer about who you want to be and how you want to live. This is also the stage that brings some of the hardest work and greatest effort. Focus and attention to detail are vital to being successful in this stage. Because of this, Stage 4 is the stage where the temptation is greatest to give up, give in, and fall back into your old way of living. It's essential to leverage particular techniques to keep yourself motivated. When you make it through this stage, the final stage is cause for celebration.

5. Stage 5 – Maintenance

This is the stage when you've reached success. Stage 5 is characterized by successful, sustained lifestyle modification and consistent forward momentum. Once you have shed poor habits and replaced them with positive ones or have navigated the change to the degree you desired, then you're in the maintenance stage.

It's been my experience that too often, people bounce between stages 2, 3, and 4. In other words, people become “yo-yo” dieters, exercisers, goal setters, and goal accomplishes. What an awful way to go through life...and yet we do it, regularly. Do you find yourself in a continual cycle of thinking about changes you want to make, planning how to make those changes, and then making false start after false start, only to retreat back to thinking about the change you want to make? Makes you dizzy just reading it.

Now, here's a key to this whole process. The power of this model is recognizing that these stages are sequential and conditional. What this means is that it is necessary to move from one stage to the next without skipping stages. This also increases your potential for success. It's vital to focus first on understanding which stage you're in and then to concentrate on moving to the next stage. Think of some questions you can ask yourself to move from one stage to the next. For example: if you're in the Pre-contemplation stage, how would the change you want to make improve your life? By simply thinking about the possibilities, you've moved into Contemplation stage. Pretty cool, huh? Focusing on reaching the next stage can often be more successful than focusing solely on the end goal. Know your goal but work on moving a stage at a time.