

Change is Simple

Cathy Dempsey, LCPC

Change is simple, change is hard. Strangely enough, change can be both of these things. When we view someone else's bad habit (your husband's over-eating, for instance), we often view the change as simple. "Eating all that junk food is terrible for his health, why doesn't he *just stop*?" However, when the bad habit is *ours*, it suddenly doesn't seem so easy. How we decide to change and then how we go about changing is the key to understanding this deceptively simple concept.

Basically, change takes time and we often make **several attempts at change** before it becomes a habit—a part of our daily life. In 1982, Drs. James Prochaska and C.C. DiClemente noticed a common pattern with how people tried to change. Whether people were trying to quit biting their nails, alter eating habits or begin an exercise program they appeared to go through 5 distinct stages of change:

- 1. Pre-contemplation** - You don't think that a change is necessary.
- 2. Contemplation** - You consider that change might be needed.
- 3. Preparation** - You know that change is necessary—even desirable—and you get ready for the change.
- 4. Action** - You change the behavior—step-by-step
- 5. Maintenance** - You integrate that change into your daily life, so that it becomes a habit. (DiClemente, C.C., & Prochaska, J.O. "Self Change and therapy of change of smoking behavior: A comparison of processes of change in cessation and maintenance." *Addictive Behavior*, 133-142.)

Where many of us get into trouble is the pre-contemplation stage. Here, if you are the person with the unhealthy habit (e.g., the over-eating husband), you are convinced that your eating

habits are not the cause of any problems. You can rationalize that any negative consequences have different and more valid causes. Sure, you have gained weight, but that is because all of the men in your family are heavy-set. You may have difficulty catching your breath sometimes, but that's just caused by the chronic bronchitis you had as a child. As long as any evidence that over-eating is unhealthy can be contradicted by your own personal "facts," you remain unconvinced that your food consumption will harm *you*. It may harm *them*, but not you. No matter how much you are bombarded with warnings and threats, at this stage of change, you aren't budging. In fact, you are **Pre-contemplative**.

Moving to the **Contemplation Stage** generally requires a very personal event. The danger of the behavior becomes a clear, present and personal threat. This personalizing of the danger can take a variety of forms. Perhaps your 8-year-old child says, "Daddy, I don't want you to die of a heart attack." Even though other people may have said similar things, the innocence of a child can be quite powerful. Imagine the impact, if your physician were to say, "Your blood pressure is dangerously high. We need to schedule more tests."

These powerful events may be enough to get anyone's attention. But what if such a forceful external event doesn't occur? How do you realize that change may be needed? This occurs when you internally acknowledge that the "risk fits," that your bad habit has negatively affected you.

You might be able to rationalize that you can still play touch football, but do you perform at the same level of others at your age? Look in the mirror and instead of making another excuse, "Yes, but others don't have the same stress I do." Try saying "No! I'm not as healthy as my peers. What if I didn't over-eat?"

Make a pro- and con-list; delineate the

benefits of over-eating vs. the drawbacks. Consider the possibility that the danger of maintaining your eating habits is greater than the fear of changing. It's easy to get wrapped up in showing everyone how wrong they are, instead of considering how right they might be. Until you internalize that desire, you won't be ready to consider that change may be necessary. Once the negative consequences of a behavior are crystallized into a very real (personal) possibility, you begin to *contemplate the possibility of change*.

At this point, you start to seriously review all the risks involved with change. What will you do when you get bored? How will you concentrate, relax, and socialize without all of that food? It is important to consider these things. There are negative aspects to changing a behavior. There is discomfort, unfamiliarity, and confusion. Don't ignore these fears! Write down your concerns and develop an Action Plan to counteract them. If you are afraid of what you will do when you give something up, remember to REPLACE that behavior with something else more beneficial (i.e., don't start drinking once you've quit over-eating!) Consult friends, family members and any other people you know who have successfully changed behaviors. Start to make your plan.

Guess what? You have just moved into the **Action stage**.

You are determined to take action. The pitfall in this stage is thinking that once you *decide* to act, you *will* act. The reality is that change occurs in fits and starts. Change is a process, not an event. Any newly-learned behavior takes practice. Have you ever tried to learn to play a musical instrument, speak a foreign language, or learn a new computer program? Few of us pick up something new and immediately master it. How can Barry Bonds hit 3 home runs one day and strike out 5 times the next? Because some days *are better than others*. Deciding to

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Change Is Simple, Continued

change a behavior, and creating a plan to do so means that some days your plan will work well, and other days it won't. But you keep trying. Just as a toddler keeps trying to walk, you keep trying not to over-indulge. If you need help you can review the work you did in the contemplation stage, go back to your pro- and con-list, review the costs of over-eating vs. the benefits of a healthier diet. You can re-group and try again. It's called practice. Everybody does it.

After a while your diligent practice leads

to an amazing thing: your new behavior becomes familiar. It becomes a habit. Congratulations! You are now in the **Maintenance Stage**, meaning that you have moved from the bad habit over-eating to a good habit of stopping eating once you're full. Once you engage in the action of practicing a new behavior for about 6 weeks, most experts agree that it will become an automatic response, a part of your daily life.

The Stages of Change require a lot of preparation before the actual behavior

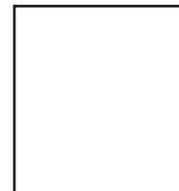
is altered. Once the preparation work is done, the changing part is easier. Do not be discouraged if you find yourself moving back and forth between the first few stages. It is important to do the legwork thoroughly before actually changing the behavior. Your EAP can assist you as you embark on the simple yet challenging process of change.

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-T.H. Thompson and John Watson