



What are you *really* ready to change?

Is your career moving along as you planned except for one thing that you'd like to change but can't seem to get around to changing?

“Everybody can see the goal, especially somebody else's goal. Why don't you just [fill in the blank – lose weight, exercise more, stop working so much, be more tactful....]. You want it too. But, you know you can't just flip the switch. It's like the new business opportunity you want to pursue. You can't just quit your job and start tomorrow. You can't do it all yourself. You have to noodle on it, think about all the possibilities. You don't want to leap and fall on your face again. If you fail it's harder to try again. Why can't you just leap and try it?”

MJ – Real Estate law manager

Why can't you just leap and try it- because, it's a big waste of your time, energy and confidence to just *try* anything. There is a better and more effective, more efficient way to change.

You have to know what you are *really* ready to change. Once you know that, you can follow the necessary steps to get ready to take action – and make the change, once and for all, that you've been wanting.

Introduction

This article will describe how you can change in the most efficient and effective way possible. The most effective and efficient way is also the most painless, most successful the first time and requires the least amount of energy. Although changing behavior doesn't happen in a straight line, knowing what you are ready to change will make it a tighter spiral of steady improvement vs. an endless series of rising and falling and rising and falling.

When I first read about the six stages of readiness to change and that “action” (actually making the change) was Stage 4, I was intrigued and skeptical. I was intrigued because I wanted to know what steps had come before “action”. I was skeptical because I didn’t think you had to be *ready* to change in order to change. I thought that willpower was enough to make change happen. This important to me because if I can help my clients know what they’re ready to change and stop trying to change what they’re not ready to change; they will have more success and energy and less failure and disappointment. If I can do that myself and help others do it too, I think life will be easier and rewarding.

There are three things I want you to get from reading this article:



1. The importance of all six stages of change, especially stage 1,2,3
2. The importance of acknowledging what you’re *not* ready to change
3. An easy way to know where you are in the stages

First, I’ll quickly review what successful change is.

Second, the six stages of readiness to change will be explained. You’ll learn why it is important to be in the ‘not ready to change’ stage or to ‘just think about it’ stage before you take action.

Third, I’ll leave you with some questions that will help you analyze where you are in the stages of change and what you can do to move forward, wherever you are.

Although this process could be applied to making organizational change, in this article I will focus on individual change.

Successful Change

For every complex problem there is an easy answer, and it is wrong.

H.L. Mencken

Face it, we’ve all tried to change something about ourselves – losing weight, working less, quitting smoking, exercising more, being more patient with clients, communicating more directly with employees, saying ‘no’ more often and on and on. Think back to something you tried to change, a recent New Year’s resolution perhaps, where 2 days or 2 weeks later you were back doing the same old thing. Then remember back to a situation where you changed and really succeeded. What was the difference? What did you do (or not do) to prepare, to commit to making the change then to maintain it?

“Successful individuals who want to make a change themselves follow a powerful and, perhaps more important, controllable and predictable course. Along this course are various stages, each calling for particular and different approaches to change. Action is simply one of the six stages. No one stage is any more or less important than another. In our research we have found that fewer than 20% of a problem population is prepared

for action at any given time. And yet more than 90% of behavior change programs are designed with this 20% in mind.”

Our scientific approach to self- change is in knowing what stage you are in for the problem at hand. Much is encouraging, including the fact that even people who are not ready to act can set the change process into motion. This approach does not require outside help. In change, as in many other aspects of life, timing is everything. “

Research has consistently shown that people who try to accomplish changes they are not ready for set themselves up for failure. This article will describe how to get yourself ready so you don't jump to action too soon. Similarly, if you spend too much time working on tasks you have already mastered—such as understanding your problem—you may delay acting upon it indefinitely. A key to successful change is in knowing what change readiness stage you are in and taking steps that are appropriate for that stage.

These were radical thoughts for me when I first read them because I couldn't imagine that there were stages of change I could easily identify, that there were different things required of me in each stage (vs. just 'try harder' as the only action) and that this was scientifically proven in research.

The average person tries to change something by taking action first, and often fails to sustain the change. This approach describes why all six stages of change are critical for success, not just the action stage. This article outlines **the 'art and science of effective self change'**.



The Six Stages of Change

There are very specific stages of change that we all have to go through to make changes.

The stages of change:

1. Pre-contemplation – can't see the problem
2. Contemplation-begin thinking there's a problem
3. Preparation- 'fixin' to get ready' to address the problem
4. Action-making the change
5. Maintenance-sticking with it
6. Termination-don't even have to think about it any more

Stage 1 Precontemplation

“It isn’t that they can’t see the solution. It is that they can’t see the problem” (Chesterton)

This is that frustrating place where you can see what everyone else needs to change and they just aren’t interested. It’s also the place where everyone else can see what you might change, but you can’t see it...yet. I think one of the most powerful ideas in this model is that you have to be in the ‘not ready to change’ stage until you’re ready to change. Sounds perplexing? I’ve observed that each time I said to someone, “It doesn’t look to me like you’re ready to change” (based on the typical characteristics of Precontemplation) and told them how important it is to stay in that stage until they’re ready, that they’ve been relieved. And, paradoxically, it is acknowledging what they were not ready to change that has often been what allowed them to begin thinking about changing. Notice that I say begin “thinking” about changing which is the second stage – contemplation.

Some key characteristics of Precontemplation

- Have no intention of changing the behavior. Deny having a problem
- Others can clearly see the problem
- May change temporarily if there is great and constant external pressure
- Lack information about the problem and maintain ignorant bliss

Chances are we all have at least one behavior that may be self-defeating or damaging that we’re not even thinking about changing. (And that’s OK because we’re not ready)

Stage 2 Contemplation

In the Contemplation stage you begin to acknowledge that there could be a problem and begin to think seriously about solving it. You don’t want to be stuck anymore.

- Have indefinite plans to take action
- May be far from actually making a commitment to action.
- May know where to go and how to get there, but are not quite ready to go yet.
- May stay in this stage a very long time, often saying that some day you are going to change.

Stage 3 Preparation

My friend Donna just lost a bunch of weight and has kept it off. When I asked her how long she’d been thinking about losing the weight she said “eight years”. She’s a perfect example of someone successfully waiting until she was really ready to change, then going through the phases to be successful. She was in stages 1,2,3 (not ready, thinkin’ about it and fixin’ to get ready to change) for eight years. Then she took action, lost the weight within 4 months and has kept it off.

This stage is where you solidify your commitment to the change and make plans to take action within the next month. If the preparation stage is cut short, the ultimate chance of success is lowered. The change is best served by planning carefully; developing a firm, detailed scheme for action, and making sure the pitfalls are anticipated and planned for

so the new behavior can be maintained. This is the move from wishful thinking and the illusion of willpower alone to making real change.

- You tell others what you intend to do and ask for their support.
- Awareness is high and anticipation is palpable.

Stage 4 Action

This is where you take the steps you've been preparing to take.

- Requires the greatest commitment of time and energy.
- Actions are more visible to others and thus, receive greatest recognition
- Danger of erroneously equating action with change, overlooking the equally important (and often more challenging) efforts to maintain the changes following action.

Carrying a piano in
East Calcutta 1944

Stage 5 Maintenance

In this stage you solidify the gains from the Action stage and all the others. The work here is to prevent lapses and relapse.

- Can last from 6 months to a lifetime
- Without a strong commitment, there will surely be relapse, usually to the precontemplation or contemplation stage.
- Completely replace the ineffective behaviors with new more effective ones.

Stage 6 Termination – you don't even think about the situation anymore

For me, the best example I have is that I quit smoking many years ago. Except for that trip to France a number of years ago when I smoked cigarillos with an 83 year old French woman, smoking isn't part of my life. I don't even think about it, even when I'm around people who smoke.

- Problem longer presents temptation or threat
- Complete confidence of coping without fear of relapse.
- Change cycle is exited and considered complete

Support Needed is Different at Each Stage

Relying on support is very important. Think of problem as **“an old piano that needs to be carried down a flight of stairs. No way to do it without friends.”**



Carrying a piano in East Calcutta 1944

What is required of your supporters is different in each stage.

Stage	What is required from Supporters
Precontemplation	Gently and courageously mention the impact of their behavior. Often they can't see it til they hear it from you. Don't nag, give up or enable
Contemplation	Empathy and warmth
Preparation	Enlist with specific ways to support
Action	Create a contract with supporters
Maintenance	On call for crisis situations Patience, persistence, understanding
Termination – Success	Supporters aren't needed

So why do you have to go through all the stages to have successful change? Research on 80,000 people showed that a statistically significant number of people *who succeeded* at changing behavior forever went through all six stages. The process does not define how long you have to stay in each stage, but does strongly suggest that you have to do the work of each stage in order to successfully change and not relapse or go back to old behaviors. Ask yourself—do I want to change this behavior forever and do it in the most efficient way? If yes, then you'll have to spend time in each stage. **It's the**



Big Paradox—you have to go slow to go fast.

So you're curious about what stage you're in for a particular behavior. Answer these simple four questions to determine what stage you're in.

Change Stage Assessment – Where Are You?

Answer these questions – yes or no

1. I solved my problem more than six months ago.
2. I have taken action on my problem within the past six months.
3. I am intending to take action in the next month.
4. I am intending to take action in the next six months.

Answer no to all statements = Precontemplation stage – *You're not ready to change*

Answer no to questions 1,2,3 and yes to question 4 = Contemplation stage – *Thinkin' about it*

Answer yes to statement 3 and 4 = Preparation stage – *Fixin' to get ready*

Answer no to statement 1 and yes to statement 2 = Action stage – *You're ready to make the change*

Answer yes to statement 1 = Maintenance – *You're stickin' with it*

Summary and the Next Steps

You've just read about the stages of change, why it's most effective and efficient to spend time in each stage and what stage of change you're in.

The next steps are to:

- Identify a behavior that you could change. Ask yourself if you'd like to change it. Then answer the 4 questions. If you're in precontemplation, let yourself be not ready until you're ready.
- Do the work of the stage that you're in. For example, if you're in Contemplation, then you have to think about the impact of not taking action. Get more information about what is the work of each stage from Pam Rechel at Brave Heart Consulting or Prochaska, *Changing for Good*.
- Move to the next stage only when you're ready
- Learn from relapse
- Congratulate yourself for learning how to effectively change a behavior forever