

“You Can Lead a Horse to Water”

Understanding and Motivating Personal Change with Hard-to-Serve Clients

By Steve Parese, Ed.D, 2013

The old saying goes: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” Helping professionals often lead needy people to the river of self-improvement, but it can be incredibly frustrating when they refuse our help.

This brief article will explore three important questions:

1. Why is change is so hard, even when it is necessary?
2. What predictable stages do successful changers go through?
3. What can we do to motivate ourselves and others to make positive changes?



Part 1: Why is Change So Hard?

The opening line of M. Scott Peck’s classic book The Road Less Traveled acknowledges an essential truth: “Life is difficult.” The second line could have been: “And change is harder!”

Why is change so difficult? Neurologists point out that neural pathways are established when actions are repeated over and over again, making old choices easier than new ones -- even when the old ones are unhealthy.

Addictions specialists note that certain behaviors stimulate dopamine production in the brain, creating a pleasurable short term response that becomes hard to resist -- even when the long term result is self-destructive.

A third explanation is sometimes referred to as the “boiling frog syndrome.” As the story goes, if a frog is dropped in a pot of boiling water, it immediately leaps out of danger. But if the same frog is put in a pot of cool water and the temperature is very gradually increased, it will sit comfortably as its strength is slowly sapped and its life eventually boiled away.

As human beings, we can become accustomed to almost any conditions. Change is challenging, complacency usually much easier. Unless there is a sudden wake-up call, we may not even notice how unpleasant our lives have become until it is almost too late.

Ultimately, many people prefer familiar misery to unfamiliar change. This can be especially true for individuals with significant mental, emotional and physical health issues, people who live lives of quiet desperation, struggling by day-to-day in survival mode.

As helping professionals, it is easy become frustrated and overwhelmed when our attempts to assist them fail. Without an understanding of the change process, we may find ourselves pushing and pulling, bullying and cajoling our clients toward necessary improvement.... while they resist our every efforts every step of the way. You can lead a horse to water, and drown him trying to make him take a drink!

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Part 2: Predictable Stages of Change

To understand why challenging customers and clients resist change, we need only look within, and examine the frustration of trying to make improvements in our own lives. How many of us, despite numerous New Year's resolutions, have failed to improve our diets, lose weight, quit smoking, etc.? How many have struggled to find recovery from addictive behaviors, relapsing into unhealthy habits even when we know how destructive those choices may be?



Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross (1992) discovered that people who successfully change follow a predictable course that takes great patience and courage. They go through five stages before positive changes stick. Those who skip or rush through stages often slip back into old habits. Understanding each of stages offers us insights into motivating ourselves and others toward meaningful change.

Stage 1: Resistance

Stage 1 is the RESISTANCE stage (or “Precontemplation” according to Prochaska, et. al.). It isn't that we can't find a solution, it's that we don't see the problem. We don't want to hear about it, think about it, talk about it, or read about it. If there's a problem, it's that others won't back off and leave well enough alone. If we DO attempt to make a change in this stage, it's usually because someone has

put pressure on us. When the pressure is off, we usually go right back to our old ways.

Stage 2: Thinking

Stage 2 is the THINKING Stage (or “Contemplation” according to Prochaska, et. al.). We are aware of the problem and its consequences, but haven't made a real commitment to solving it yet. We may spend a lot of time thinking and talking about the problem, promising ourselves that we will act someday -- say in the next 6 months or so -- but not just yet. We may make small changes and hope that's good enough, avoiding the investment needed for real change. Many people spend months or even years stuck in the Thinking Stage, aware of their problems but avoiding a full commitment to change.

Stage 3: Planning

Stage 3 is the PLANNING Stage. Sometimes it takes a major event to move us from just thinking about change to seriously planning for it. In this stage, we intend to make a real change in the next 30 days. We set solid goals and develop plans to reach those goals. We prepare ourselves for the challenges that change will bring. For example, we might take classes to learn new skills, ask about support groups, plan how to deal with temptations. Many times, people make minor changes in this stage. People who try to change too quickly without preparing first often fail, however, and feel discouraged about future changes.

Stage 4: Action

Stage 4 is the ACTION stage, encompassing the first 6 months of change. We take action by changing our behavior, our experiences, and/or our environment. The first days are often the toughest as we struggle to resist temptations. We may add positive habits to support the change in our negative habits. For instance, we may attend support groups, change friends, or develop a new lifestyle. During this stage, we often get recognition from others and take pride in our changes. Some short term backsliding is common, even in those who have long term success.

Stage 5: Maintenance

Stage 5 is the MAINTENANCE Stage, and begins after 6 months or so. We've been fairly successful in making change during this period, and new habits are pretty well established. Some bad habits can be broken in 6 months, while other more addictive behaviors require a "one day at a time" approach. Many people see themselves as different than they once were, and some even try to help others with similar problems. But we also recognize that we may need support to prevent relapse into old ways, so we pay attention to situations which might tempt us to return to bad habits.

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Part 3: Bridges Through the Stages

Many of us have tried to make positive changes in our lives, only to backslide at some point. The research on self-change tells us that we can't skip stages and expect to be successful. At each stage, there are certain things we should do in order to "learn our lessons" and pass on to the next stage. If we don't do the work in an earlier stage, we will probably fail later on.



Think of each stage as an island, with bridges in between.

A. To cross from Resistance to Thinking, the bridge is REFLECTION. We have to acknowledge that we have a problem, and become aware of its consequences. People who make it across this bridge are willing to look at their goals in life, and see how their past decisions have limited them. They've thought carefully about the people and things they value most, and have looked at how their choices are affecting those people. They've looked deep within, and admitted to themselves, "I'm not the man or woman I want to be..."

To help in this stage, encourage them to:

- (1) Reflect on deeper feelings about their behavior.
- (2) Think about their goals in life, and people important to them.

B. To cross from Thinking to Planning, the bridge is INSPIRATION. We must be willing to accept both responsibility and help. People who move from just thinking about change to actually committing to it come to believe that their problems can be solved, but that they must be the ones to solve them. They've found the courage to humble themselves and ask for help, to learn more about the addictive nature of their behavior. They reach out for inspiration from family and friends, from professionals, from a support group, or from a Higher Power.

To help in this stage, inspire the person to:

- (1) Accept responsibility for solving problem (not blame for causing it).
- (2) Humble themselves, be willing to ask for hope & help from others.

C. To cross from Planning to Action, the bridge is PREPARATION, since cold turkey solutions often fail. People who effectively plan for successful change and move into the Action stage often set a target date for change within the next 30 days, and write it

on the calendar or announce their decision to family and friends. They get ready for known temptations by researching support groups, reading books about their problem, seeking out professional help. They know that the first few weeks and months of change will be tough, so they use this planning time to get ready for it.

To help in this stage, prepare the person to:

- (1) Research support networks and/or treatment options.
- (2) Announce a target date to family and friends.

D. To cross from Action to Maintenance, the bridge is DETERMINATION. To make it through those first 6 months requires the willpower to use the plans and resources put in place earlier. Those who make it successfully to 6 months often move into Maintenance stage, where behavior habits are better established, and a good support network is already in place. To stay there, they work hard at avoiding high risk situations while building a new life based around new, healthier behaviors. They get better at giving themselves praise and encouragement, and even begin helping others make similar changes. They don't make excuses, but they do forgive themselves and get right back on track if they slip up.

To help in this stage, encourage the person to:

- (1) Keeping using their plan without testing themselves with temptations.
- (2) Chart both progress and setbacks with 100% honesty.

Part 4: Closing

In our frustration, it can sometimes be tempting to use guilt, punishment, humiliation, or shame to push another person toward the change they need but are resisting. But the simple truth is this: **We cannot inspire others to be better by making them feel worse.**

Self-change is the only type that lasts, and it requires a journey of self-discovery which cannot be forced.

In closing, consider this brief poem by Portia Nelson.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE SHORT CHAPTERS

Chapter I

*I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost ... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.*

Chapter II

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I'm in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.*

Chapter III

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I see it there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.
My eyes are open.
I know where I am.
It's my fault.
I get out immediately.*

Chapter IV

*I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.*

Chapter V

I walk down another street.

READINGS & RESOURCES:

Prochaska, JO; DiClemente, CC; Norcross, JC. [In search of how people change. Applications to addictive behaviors.](#) American Psychology 1992 Sep; 47(9):1102-14.

For more information about soft skills training programs for challenging populations, visit

4 www.WorkinItOut.com or contact the author, Dr. Steve Parese by email at SBParese@aol.com.