

## Getting ready: the key to successful change

Have you ever gone on a diet, vowed to start exercising, or tried to quit smoking? Are you able to keep your New Year's resolutions? Most people have some behavior or situation in their life they would like to change, but change is often difficult and resistance to it is natural. Change is so difficult, in fact, that approximately 60% of those who make a New Year's resolution make the same resolution again the following year!

### Why is change so difficult?

Inherent in change is a sense of the unknown and a fear of lack of control. It is human nature to cling to the familiar, even when the familiar is negative. People also want to match their abilities to their challenges, and change *is* a challenge. So if they feel that a challenge is greater than their ability to meet the challenge, they are likely to react with anxiety and resistance.

### When Changing a Behavior, You Move Through Stages

Successful change involves a gradual progression through a series of stages. If you want to be effective in your efforts, it's helpful to view change as a process having predictable events and signposts. Being familiar with this process will allow you to prepare for and influence what will happen as you attempt to change.

It's important to allow yourself to do the work of each stage rather than leaping into a change simply because it seems like a good idea.

1. In the first stage of change, there is either little or no awareness of a need to change or no intention to change. You may not even be thinking about changing and will deny the need. For example, someone may comment that you've put on extra weight. In response, you are likely to let them know that the red pants you are wearing just *make* you look bigger.
2. In the second stage, you gradually become aware that a need for change might exist and you start thinking about it. "Well, maybe I have put on some weight, but I don't know if I really need to be concerned about it." You start evaluating the costs and benefits of making a change (losing weight) and consider whether you have what it takes to make the change. However, just because you are aware of the need for change doesn't mean that you have decided to do something about it.

As you review the costs and benefits, it's helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- o What am I getting out of keeping this behavior/situation the way it is?
- o What are the disadvantages of holding on to this behavior/situation?
- o What is the scariest, toughest, and/or worst part about changing this behavior/situation?
- o What is the value of changing this behavior/situation?

The reality is that the benefits of the change must outweigh the benefits of keeping the status quo. Otherwise, you are not likely to feel motivated to change.

3. Once you have decided to attempt the change, you'll need to prepare by looking at what you need to do in order to succeed. For example: "Yes, I have to lose weight. I need a good diet and exercise plan, and I need support." Preparing for the change involves building your capacity to meet the challenge. It can be helpful to examine past situations in which you were successful to determine what was helpful and what was not helpful. Preparation also involves making your action plan for change. Your plan should be both specific and realistic, e.g., "I will spend 30 minutes three days each week swimming laps at the community pool," rather than, "I will run three miles seven days a week."
4. Now you are actually ready to take action to change your behavior. This requires a commitment of both time and energy. Commitment involves testing your action plan, overcoming the doubts, discomfort and resistance that may surface, revising your plan if necessary, adopting your plan, and continuing to work the plan until the change becomes the norm, e.g., part of

your ongoing routine.

5. Once the change is the norm, you have reached the final stage of maintaining the new behavior and enjoying the gains of the change. It is common to feel the urge to move back into old familiar behaviors because habits are hard to break. If this should occur, avoid feeling guilt or embarrassment. Instead, ask yourself: "What do I need to do to make this effort more successful for me?" "What should I do differently?" Learn from your mistakes, rally the support you need, and try again.

Making a major change is difficult and can involve much trial and readjustment. It makes you feel uncomfortable and places you in unfamiliar territory. To be successful, be ready for the change by taking small steps, weighing the costs and benefits, making a realistic action plan, and gathering the resources you need. Then take committed action that carries you to a successful behavioral change.

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