

Stages of Change

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Whether it is developing a prayer life, going to the gym or learning to play golf, changing ourselves is a process, not a one time event. It involves predictable stages. And each stage needs different resources to help us move on.

Think of any change you have made, like losing weight. At first, we may not have felt any need. Then, we started toying with the idea and weighed the upside and downside of dieting. This is starting the change process.

Next, we prepared for it, maybe learning about various diets and exercise, and getting things and support in place.

Finally we took action and plunged in. After some weight was lost, then it was a matter of maintaining the change.

And if we got off track at some point and gained a lot of weight, we had to restart the process.

And so it will be with the task of overcoming a sexual habit. We will face different challenges and need different things at the various stages, and it's helpful to understand all of this.

0. Not Thinking About Change

“I'm fine—there's no problem.” Or, “It's not that bad.”

This is prior to the stages of real change. We have little or no awareness of a problem and any need to improve something about us.

Or we are aware of a need to change but we are unwilling to try to change. It seems too hard. Maybe we are discouraged from prior unsuccessful attempts. Or the pain of change does not seem to be offset by the anticipated benefits.

In this state of mind, we tend to defend our attitude and behavior, maybe rationalizing or blaming outside causes. In any case, we have no interest in receiving help.

1. Thinking About Change

“There seems to be a problem but I'm not sure I want to change, at least not yet.”

Once we are aware that we may need some kind of self-improvement campaign, we begin weighing the pros and cons of change. Is it worth working on this? Will the potential rewards outweigh the discomfort?

You might be here now. If so, when things get difficult, you naturally return to the debate in your mind: Do I really want to stop this habit? Is porn that bad? Or, is change possible? Is there a realistic route? And could I do it?

This is the time for learning about the benefits of change, and the damage done if you don't change. And the ways to recovery that are available.

It's also the time to voice your doubts. Don't be afraid to talk about your mixed feelings about recovery. Maybe I can't always answer your doubts and fears—there is no getting around the difficulties—but having someone to vent to is helpful.

By the way, during this Thinking about Change stage, pain and the fear of pain tends to motivate most. In other words, staying stuck in the habit has to seem worse than whatever it would take to break the habit.

Also, it's great to hear a success story where someone like you—or worse off than you—was able to get free. Look for victory stories.

STAGES OF CHANGE



2. Preparing for Change

“I want to change and I’m planning how I can do it.”

This stage could also be called Determined to Change. We have decided to change, and now we are preparing for it.

This involves collecting the resources and knowledge we need to succeed and to reduce the discomfort of change. We are trying to overcome anticipated obstacles

and make the change as easy as possible. You may also be taking small steps towards the change already.

If you were working on walking more, for example, you might get some comfortable shoes, find a walking buddy, figure out what route will be long enough and safe enough, and look at your schedule to plan good times during the week. You may also be adding more steps to your daily routine, like taking the stairs more often.

This is when we are most receptive to gaining information, learning techniques and skills, and getting assistance. You actively ask for help. (You may have first read this while being in this stage!)

By the way, sometimes people skip this preparation and plunge in recklessly but with good intentions. It usually does not go well and they end up discouraged and Not Thinking about Change any longer.

You are researching about porn habits or sex addiction. You are learning how others have overcome it and have some sense of what is needed. You may be tracking down a therapist or coach, and support groups.

In this stage, the problems caused by the porn habit are still highly motivating, but there are also the anticipated joys of change and freedom—freedom from the painful consequences of your habit.

We are looking forward to the future, rather than longingly at the pleasures of the past, and so hearing testimonies from others about how great it will be is valuable now.

3. Making the Change

“I’m taking action to change.”

You are now carrying out your plan. You have now begun your recovery regimen. You have reorganized your environment and schedule to reduce temptation. You are getting individual coaching, and are part of a support group. You have enlisted the help of an accountability partner.

You are learning to manage your thoughts and feelings. You are replacing your unwanted habits with healthier ones. You are relating to your partner and others in different and more fulfilling ways.

This action stage has novelty and other immediate rewards on its side to keep us motivated. It is interesting. Your friends and loved ones are encouraging you. You are beginning to see the payoff in one form or another, which strengthens your hope. You feel better, more self-respect. You have more time to do what you want to do now that the habit is not stealing it.

After about 6 weeks or 40 days, the new behaviors are becoming easier. They require less focus. The change is no longer the center of your life. You are getting into the groove.

4. Keeping the Change Going

“I’m living in a new way.”

The final stage is one of maintenance. This means sustaining our changes and motivation through shifting situations. This is the stage people are often unprepared for.

All the energy for change initially went into getting the change started, like a rocket trying to penetrate the earth’s atmosphere. Once done, the maintenance stage is like being in orbit. It’s really different.

Or you can say that the Making the Change stage was like the sprint to outrun all the opposition and inner resistance to achieve the change. Now the marathon begins, to keep it going. And it requires different muscles and skills.

We now need stamina, and resilience. As in a long race, we need to pace ourselves and figure out how to adapt to the unexpected rut and huge puddle and downed tree in the road. Or their painful cramps or blister on our foot.

We have to anticipate temptations to return to the old ways. Others are no longer congratulating us for our change; they take it for granted. The new regimens we adopted have become tiresome and boring. We wonder if certain restrictions or inconveniences are still needed.

One challenge now is to avoid complacency: “I’ve got this beat! I can afford to let up on my discipline and let my guard down.”

Risk of Relapse

It’s easy to start cutting corners. We skip connecting with our coach or group, let ourselves look at things online that we shouldn’t and put ourselves at risk of relapse.

Or we could be sticking to our program but end up facing a lot of stress and obstacles we were unprepared for. We slip back into the habit.

If we handle that constructively, we can just get back to where we were and keep going. For example, we may just tell our accountability partner in spite of fears of disappointing them. We get the support we need, we figure out where our defenses were weak and fortify them, and return to Keeping the Change Going.

If we don’t handle our slip well, and the new challenges we face are more complicated, we might return to the preparation stage briefly to bone up on what we need to manage the new challenge. Then we return to the action and maintenance stages, a little wiser and better prepared.

If we backslide and don't respond to it well, then we can get deeply discouraged. We can slip all the way back to the Thinking about Change stage. We question whether change is possible for us, and whether it is worth trying again. (Maybe you have been there, right?) Worse, we may close the door to change, and get stuck in Not Thinking about Change.

Questions:

- 1. Can you relate to this description of the change process? Why or why not?*
- 2. Have you ever experienced the pitfalls of the Keeping the Change Going stage?*
- 3. Do you think you have entered the Keeping the Change Going stage yet? Why or why not?*