

Small Steps to Health and Wealth Five Stages of Change

A few years ago, as I was preparing to teach the Small Steps to Health and Wealth course, I read a book on the psychology of change called, *Changing for Good*. The authors had researched how people change, what programs or processes worked and how successful people are at sustaining a change. As they studied how 1000 people were able to change, they started to see a pattern forming for stages of change.

The “model of change” that developed identified five stages of change. *Pre-contemplation* is the first stage. People in this stage may not even know they want or need to change. This stage is marked by denial. Though others suggest we need to change, drop hints, etc., we do not identify change as necessary for us. In the *contemplation* stage, we start to think about changing. People in this stage start wondering about what would be different in their lives if they did change. *Preparation* is the next stage. During this phase, we make serious plans for changing. We try to gain skills to make changes and we enlist support of others. We may even prepare for how to deal with temptations of falling back to the habit we are trying to change. The *action* stage is characterized by doing something to change. Whether the action is adding a new activity, for instance exercising, or dropping an activity, such as smoking, there is usually something being done that is tangible and visible. The *maintenance* stage is when people work to sustain their change. The maintenance stage is still a considerable amount of work to avoid situations that will draw you back to your previous behavior.

The authors of *Changing for Good*, suggest that it is best not to think of change as a linear path. It is rather more like a spiral or spring where you can cycle through a stage and then “re-cycle” back through a stage. While studying people who eventually became successful with the changes in their lives, the authors

noted that very few people took a direct path to sustained change. Most everyone had to go back through some of the stages again and start spiraling upward. The theory is that each time through the cycle, you have learned more to help propel you toward positive change and maintenance. Or as Heraclitus said, “You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing in.” If you are going through a change phase again, you or what is happening in your world may be more prepared for that phase to allow it to be successful. James Yorke said, “The most successful people are those who are good at plan B.”

As you consider your own health and wealth goals, you can use this knowledge of the change process. When you move between stages, even if you are “re-cycling” backward, know that you can learn something positive at each stage. I sort of think of it like the two-step dance. Even though you work two steps forward and one back, you still can get a rhythm going and move yourself across the dance floor gracefully. A dance would look rather awkward, actually, if all you did was forward motion. It wouldn’t be nearly as much fun without the twists and turns and back steps. Your changes may be the same.

Now that you know all this about making changes, how do you apply the information to your health and wealth goals? First, identify the stage you are in with respect to a behavior. Write a statement of commitment to a change. Look for what motivates you. Substitute an unproductive behavior with a positive one. Consider all the reasons there are to make the change. List and study from the resources that can help you. Break the change down into small steps. Decide when to start taking action. Make a plan for obstacles you may face.

Change is inevitable, but when it comes to your health and wealth, why not be the one in charge of that change?