

EDUCATING YOUR CLIENTS ON  
**BEHAVIOR  
CHANGE**

by Shannon GaNun



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Consistent, life-long behavior changes are difficult. Part of our role as fitness professionals is to educate clients about behavior change and to tell them what they can expect as they transition to a healthy lifestyle.

**HELP CLIENTS UNDERSTAND BEHAVIOR CHANGE**

During the past several years, behavior change has come to be understood as a process of identifiable stages through which people pass. Behavior change is rarely a discrete, single event.

Psychologists James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente have studied and described the process of how people change a negative behavior or habit. They have portrayed five stages people usually go through in their mind before they actually make a change. When successful, these stages are progressive, building toward an eventual commitment to change.

The model has been validated and applied to a variety of behaviors that include smoking cessation and exercise and dietary behaviors.

**THE FIVE "STATES OF CHANGE"**

**Precontemplation**

The person sees no need to change. He may be resigned to the current situation and believes the consequences are not serious.

**Contemplation**

The person recognizes the problem and is weighing the benefits and costs of the behavior and the proposed change. This stage is often characterized by ambivalence about changing. A person can remain in this stage for months or years.

**Preparation**

The person plans for change within a month's time. He may be experimenting with small changes.

**Action**

The person admits to having a problem and starts taking positive action. During this stage, individuals are at the greatest risk for relapse.

**Maintenance**

The person continues the new, positive behavior for more than six months. He has made and is sustaining a lifestyle modification.

**TELL CLIENTS TO EXPECT RELAPSES**

Most people find themselves recycling through the stages of change several times (i.e. relapsing) before the change becomes truly established. This is normal and should be expected. No one is perfect. Tell your clients to look at a relapse as an opportunity to fine-tune their strategies and to make improvements for the future. Learning is a process and slips are normal, not reflections of failing.

Think of a baby learning to walk for the first time. She will need a lot of help and she will fall a lot, but her efforts are consistently reinforced. No one would tell her she will not be able to walk. Think, too, of a football game. All teams experience gains and losses in yardage during a game. If someone gives up on a behavior change after a few slips, it would be like a football team leaving the field in the first quarter after losing yardage.

**HELP YOUR CLIENTS VISUALIZE SUCCESS**

Keep reminding your clients (in person, by phone calls and through emails) of all of the benefits of successful, sustained lifestyle modifications. As they make progress, remind them how far they've come, not just how far they still have to go. They may not be where they want to be yet, but neither are they where they were. Help them to recall the reasons they decided to make a resolution change and recommit themselves to their goals. You can help them be successful. •••