

“Understanding and Facilitating Personal Change”

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Introduction

Many times people reach a point in their lives where they experience a desire to make a personal change, but do not know how to actually do it. I may wish to eat in a way that is more healthy and environmentally gentler, have a different relationship with paid employment, save money to achieve an important life goal, or behave in a manner that is less angry, defensive, and reactive. I want to see change happen in myself, but I don't know how to bring it about.

Sometimes, as educators or friends or activists, we wish to help *other* people change but are frustrated in our efforts. If we understand the process of belief and behavior change we can be more successful in these areas. If we understand what facilitates change and what blocks it, we can become skilled at producing lasting and beneficial change.

Personal change typically takes place in stages, and the following 6 stage model is helpful in understanding how change takes place. The description that follows was influenced by the work of psychologist James Prochaska, but is to a large degree based on my observations of the change process in working with students and others (including myself!) over the years. The six stages that seem to operate are No Awareness, Awareness, Active Consideration, Belief Decision, Action Commitment, and Consolidation. Let us examine these stages in some depth.

I. No Awareness

While in the first stage of No Awareness (also called Pre-Awareness), an individual has a total lack of awareness that there is an issue or a choice. There is no awareness that there is anything to think about or a choice to be made. The person simply automatically continues doing what they've always done. There is no other way. Eating meat is a good example. The person has always eaten meat, everyone they know eats meat, the only thing to think about is what kind of meat to have as the main course of each meal.

Working 40 or more hours a week at paid employment is also a good example: I simply operate on the unconscious assumption that having one's life revolve around paid employment is just the way the world is: you pick some job to be your career, you prepare yourself to do it, and then you work at it 40 or more hours a week, week after week, year after year, until you reach something called “retirement age.” You need to think, of course, about which job you choose as a career, but it's simply assumed that of course your life will be dominated by paid employment and your other interests will get the left over scraps of your time and energy.

Our beliefs at this point are typically unconscious, but none the less they are very powerful determinants of our choices and behaviors.

II. Awareness

Stage two is Awareness of an Issue. At this point, I have become aware that there is an issue and a choice to be made. I recognize that “I am choosing to eat meat. Some people choose not to eat meat.” “I am choosing to work 40 hours a week; some people choose to work less than this and have fewer material possessions and more free time.”

This is a very significant shift. It can be brought about by reading something, talking to someone with a different perspective, or simply by seeing someone else behaving in a different manner. If I am having dinner with someone and see that they are eating differently—avoiding animal products out of concern for animal suffering, choosing local foods for environmental reasons, eating health-enhancing food choices—it can cause me to realize that there is a different way of doing things and that I am actually choosing, although probably unconsciously, to eat the way I have been eating. I realize “The way I have been eating all my life is not the only way.”

At this stage, a person may resist looking at any information on the subject: “I don’t want to hear about it.” Stages one and two can involve significant denial.

III. Active Consideration

Stage three is Active Consideration. In stage three I am considering making a change in belief, and am engaged in collecting information and trying to sort things out. Making a different choice becomes a live option. This stage may involve considerable learning regarding WHY a belief change may make sense. “Why do people eating a plant based diet choose to do so? What are some of the problems with the way I’m doing things now?”

One of the obstacles to personal change that can arise here is issues regarding one’s “personal image.” When people become aware of a new way of doing things they often recognize, on some level, that adopting the new way will necessitate a change in their image of themselves (or dropping *all* their images of themselves, if we choose to work at the deepest possible level). Attachment to images of self can be a huge obstacle to change.

If someone has come to believe that it would be right for them to adopt a low consumption life style, for example, they may run into the obstacle of seeing themselves (or worry about others seeing them) as a “loser” or “failure” or “unsuccessful person” or “unhappy and deprived person who never has any fun.” If not dealt with, this can make it very difficult to implement change. Likewise, someone who is interested in making the switch to a plant-based diet may have an *image* of a vegetarian as “thin, sickly, and weak,” “hippy,” “someone who worries and fusses over food,” “someone who can’t really enjoy food,” “uptight and rigid person,” “moralistic,” “no fun,” “obsessive about food” and so on. These images can make change (particularly at the action level where it becomes publicly noticed) difficult. “If I make this change, I’ll have to see myself in a different way and other people will see me in a different way as well.” In many cases, simply bringing these issues to conscious awareness is a huge step toward removing them as an obstacle to change.

It helps also to learn to see beliefs in a different light. Instead of seeing beliefs as defining who we are as a person, we can choose to see them as impersonal tools. A belief can be seen simply as an attempt to draw a map of a part of reality. If one of the maps in my car is incorrect and needs to be changed, I don’t have a problem with that because there is the clear realization that the map is not me and does not define me as a person—it’s just a map. We can choose to see beliefs in exactly the same way.

IV. Belief Decision

Stage four is Belief Decision. At this point, I have decided that my earlier beliefs are mistaken, and I have chosen to adopt new beliefs. “It is better to eat only plant foods; I should eat less/no meat. It’s bad for me, the animals, and for the problem of world hunger and the environment.” Perhaps I now have the new belief that “It’s better to work part time and have less money and stuff but more time to do the things I really care about.”

Any time a person has been moved from one stage to another, important progress has been made. If a person does not change his or her belief but moves from Stage One to Stage Two, a significant shift has still happened: they now are aware of a *choice* that they were not aware of before. What was previously unconscious behavior has become conscious. Even in cases where a belief shift has not occurred, believing in the old way has become an *informed choice*.

Likewise, if someone moves from Two to Three, they have learned something about the *reasons* that people are vegetarians. This is valuable learning, even if they don’t make a belief change, and it may prepare them for or make possible a belief change later on. At the very least, discussing this issue with a group of people will virtually insure that everyone is moved to at least Stage Two. Thus as an educator, one can always feel at least somewhat successful even if no one chooses to believe or act differently.

V. Action Commitment

Stage five is Action Commitment. Action Commitment means acting on what one believes and actually making changes in one’s behavior. For some people this seems to come automatically with belief change: At this point, I have changed my belief; what I believed and did before doesn’t make sense to me anymore, and it doesn’t make any sense to me to continue to act in the old way. One’s attitude here is: if I realize that what I have been doing is hurting myself and hurting others, why would I want to continue to do it?

However, others may say, “I know I shouldn’t be eating meat and I feel guilty when I do but I’m still doing it.” Stage Five may involve considerable learning regarding HOW to live differently. “I want to make a change in what I do, but I don’t know how to actually bring it about.”

Often in trying to implement a desired change, we think in terms of succeeding through will power and *controlling our wants*. I have an idea of how I *should* behave, and I try to force my actual behavior to comply with my idea of what “I should” be doing. Basically, we try to impose our “*I shoulds*” over our “*I wants*” by means of will power, self discipline, and so on.

For example, I may say “I know I *should* eat healthy food” but “I *want* a doughnut.” Sometimes my will power is strong, and “I should” wins and I eat healthy food; other times my will power is weak and “I want” wins and I eat the doughnut. But whichever side comes out on top, it is always a *struggle*, there is inner conflict, and this internal wrestling match requires huge amounts of energy. Living like this is not fun, and this approach rarely produces lasting change.

Fortunately, there is another way. Rather than trying to control or dominate my wants, I need to *change my wants*. If I no longer *want* to eat the doughnut, I have no problem in not doing it, because what I should do and what I want to do are the same. I simply do what I want, there is no more inner conflict, and life becomes easy.

But this raises the question, *how does one change one's wants?* One changes one's wants by really *understanding* what one wants, why one wants it, and the consequences of wanting it.

An example will help to show how this works: no longer wanting to eat fast food hamburgers. When I look deeply into my behavior here I discover many connections: 1) animal fat causes arterial disease and animal protein promotes osteoporosis and cancer (see Colin Campbell's *The China Study*), 2) tropical rainforest is cut down to make cheap burgers, 3) corn, oats, and soybeans that people could eat are fed to livestock and it takes 10 to 15 pounds of grain to make one pound of beef, 4) when I begin to pay attention I notice how my body feels when I eat this way and how it feels differently when I eat a healthy plant based diet, 5) cattle are sensitive creatures who are fed a grain diet that makes them sick and... When I really see all this—it's not just a bunch of words but has become real to me—my *desire* for this particular product changes.

In many cases, to change successfully I must become careful observers of myself. If I do, I can begin to investigate what is *underneath* my desire to buy more and more consumer items or eat certain foods: I want the doughnut because I feel stressed, or lonely, or bored, or depressed; or I want the new car because I feel like a failure. So often we try to fill a nonmaterial hole in ourselves (a desire for connection or meaning) with a material thing (a doughnut or a car) and this strategy is never ultimately successful. If I am lonely, no amount of doughnut eating will address that—I will simply be getting momentary relief/distraction from my symptoms. The underlying issue must be addressed if behavior change is to take place.

If I become *consciously aware of my behavior while it is happening*—my desire for acceptance, fear of being wrong, craving for some object—then I can free myself from it.

There is a very useful story from the teachings of the Buddha that applies here. Imagine someone comes to you complaining of an agonizing pain in their right hand. The pain is constant and unbearable, and the person with the pain asks you what to do. You glance down and notice that the person is fiercely gripping a red hot coal in their right hand. What advice do you give? Clearly, you would tell the person in pain to let go of the coal. The Buddha's point here is that once we clearly see the *connection* between what we are doing and our suffering, it becomes very easy to let go of the behavior that is *causing* the suffering. Our problem is that frequently we don't see the connection between what we are doing and our pain, so we continue to grip the hot coal. Once we truly see the reality of our situation, it is easy to stop doing what is causing our suffering—it takes no special knowledge, great will power, or special technique to release the hot coal. Once I see that my gripping the hot coal is the *cause* of my suffering, I no longer *want* to grip it. I let go. Once I *see clearly* that my lifestyle choices (of high consumption or poor food choices, for example) are causing me to suffer, I no longer *want* those choices. No willpower is needed.

If you are standing on a busy street corner and a bus is approaching at 55 miles per hour, does it take great willpower not to step in front of a speeding bus? No. Why? Because we *see clearly* what the consequences will be, that doing this leads to suffering. Once I truly see the consequences of eating meat (personal health, animal suffering, environmental damage, world hunger, scarcity and war) I no longer have any desire to eat meat. Once I clearly see the consequences of living a high consumption lifestyle

(needing to work long hours at a job I hate, feeling stressed out, possessions not really making me happier, damage to the environment), I no longer have a desire to live in this way.

Another relevant factor in making change real in one's day to day life concerns whether one approaches change in a gradual and incremental way, or tries to making comprehensive and sweeping changes in one fell swoop. Our tendency is to think it will be easier to make one small change at a time and gradually change our behavior so that it is more like what we envision. We will stop doing the things that are causing harm but we will "taper off." Although this sounds reasonable, in fact it is very often *easier* to making sweeping changes in one's life.

Gradually cutting back on something tends to create a feeling of deprivation. If I am used to eating an eight ounce steak, eating only a four ounce steak will leave me feeling unsatisfied and wanting more. It is often easier simply not to eat any meat at all.

Secondly, cutting back on something means I am still doing it, and this serves to maintain my taste for it. We tend to think of what tastes good to us a fixed and unchangeable("I like what I like"); however, this is not actually true. If I stop consuming certain products altogether, my taste will change and it will be much easier for me to stay on track—the old foods simply no longer taste good to me and the new foods taste wonderful. This applies to other tastes as well (recreation, shopping, sedentary lifestyle, etc.)

Thirdly, merely cutting back on something frequently does not change things *enough* for me to actually experience any *benefits* from having changed (though I do often notice what I have given up in changing). Dr. Dean Ornish reports that

...patients in the comparison group of the Lifestyle Heart Trial made moderate changes in their diet (30 percent fat, 200 milligrams of cholesterol), yet they felt worse. The frequency of their chest pains increased by 165 percent. They did not lose weight. And their heart disease worsened. (*Eat More, Weigh Less*, 1993, pp. 56-58)

I may have cut my fat intake from 40% to 30% of calories, but I don't feel any better. On the other hand, if I cut my fat consumption to 15% of calories and completely eliminate dietary cholesterol, the changes in my body would be very apparent and provide me with real motivation to continue with the process of change. Dr. Ornish reports that

During the first week [after making deep and comprehensive changes in lifestyle] patients... began to lose weight and reported more energy and a greater sense of well-being than they had experienced in years. They reported a 91 percent reduction in the average frequency of chest pains due to heart disease... (pp. 56-58)

It's very much like smoking two packs of cigarettes a day (40 cigarettes) and you cut back 10%--you would still be smoking 36 cigarettes. It is easy to understand that you would feel just as bad physically as you did before you cut back. Thus it would be very easy for you to conclude that what you were doing wasn't worth it. On the other hand, if you quit smoking entirely, you would almost immediately begin to experience dramatic

improvements in how you feel and thus find motivation to continue with what you are doing.

Fourthly, sweeping changes disrupt our old routines and tend to break ingrained patterns of behavior.

Finally, cutting back on something means that I am still doing it and that means I am still making a public (though nonverbal) statement to the world that I approve of the behavior in question. Stopping the old behavior completely is more noticeable to others and creates the possibility for creating useful conversations that may help other people to ask about what I am doing and perhaps become inspired to make similar changes in their own lives.

VI. Consolidation

Stage six is Consolidation. The new behavior becomes a solid part of my life and there is no interest in going back to the old way. The new beliefs and behaviors seem normal and natural, and no special effort is required to live this way. Psychological research has consistently indicated that it only takes about 21 days to establish a new habit. However, this needs to be 21 *consecutive* days. Once established, the new and more life enhancing habit is no more difficult to have than the earlier more destructive habit. In fact, typically it is much easier.

One of the things that can help us successfully make and maintain changes is something the Buddha called *right association*. If you want to give up smoking or drinking, for example, it will be harder to succeed if you continue to associate with smokers and drinkers (particularly if they are ones who have no interest in quitting). If your roommate has no interest in school and thinks it's a waste of time, it will be much harder for you to benefit from being in school.

It will be much easier for you to be successful with change if you associate with people who already have successfully made the change, or who are in the process of making a good faith effort to change now. If I want to eat a healthy plant based diet, it will help to spend time with people who live this way now. *Nothing teaches or inspires us to learn and change like an example* (or role model) and there are several reasons for this.

An example shows me that living this way is *possible*. I can no longer maintain the fiction that "No one can do this" if I am in the presence of people who have done it and are continuing to do so.

Additionally, an example provides me with a constant illustration of *how* to live in the new way: what does shopping for food look like, how does one prepare health enhancing food, etc.

Lastly, a good example shows me the *benefits* to be derived from living this way: as a result of eating well, I can see that my new associates are strong, have good energy, appearance, calmness, and so on.

This last idea of seeing the benefits from living differently is crucial. So many times our efforts to change ourselves or convince others to change are fear based. We try to frighten people into behaving differently by pointing out the dire health or environmental consequences of maintaining our present behaviors. In my experience, people do not find fear inspiring and if you load people down with too much "doom and gloom" information they can become depressed by it and simply give up.

However, if a person can come to see the benefits of changing, then the motivation to change can become unstoppable. If living in a more sustainable way benefited my

personal finances, reduced my need for paid employment, improved my health, and benefited the environment, why wouldn't I *want* to make the change? In addition, doing something positive (being part of the solution instead of part of the problem) feels better right now—living with a perpetual gap between what we feel is right (what we *should* do) and how we *actually* behave is a very painful way to live. Beyond whatever good results may be produced in the future as a result of our actions, living with integrity transforms the quality of our lives in the present moment, and this alone makes it worth doing.

Bringing about personal change is a *learned skill*. Until we become familiar with and skilled at the process of change it can cause fear; but change can also be enormously liberating, exciting, and energizing; the more successful experiences we have with change (the more we change and reap real benefits), the easier and more comfortable it becomes to make changes in the future. We can look forward to engaging the change process--it can actually be fun!