

“The only one who likes change is a wet baby.” This statement highlights a familiar mistake when trying to change behavior: underestimating the power of the familiar. When we attempt to change a behavior, we move off our familiar map, with its well-known highways and shortcuts, and step into uncharted territory. Understanding the dynamics of change as a series of steps can help us journey from old, self-sabotaging patterns to healthier behaviors.

A useful model for healthy change is presented by Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente in their book *Changing For Good* (2006). They offer six stages to support ongoing changes:

Precontemplation: At this stage, an individual does not yet consider change. Overt denial of a problem is common. Defenses often include projecting blame onto someone or something else. Rationalizing or externalizing are typical reactions. Though problems can be apparent to others, they do not engage the individual. This is where the safety of the familiar is strongest. The individual has no motivation to step off familiar pathways into the unknown. When a priest or religious is avoiding even considering his or her problems, sometimes those around them are keenly aware of them. Because defenses are often strong at this point, it is useful to consult or practice with professionals or others in leadership before attempting to intervene. One powerful step for those in proximity to the individual is simply to stop enabling.

Contemplation: As a person breaks through denial, he or she moves into the contemplation stage. Evidence of this shift can include one’s taking ownership for a problem, rather than projecting blame. A person is now willing to talk about difficulties. Defenses are not gone, but they are lowered. This is a time of enthusiasm – think New Year’s resolutions—but it can also hold fear. We recognize there are lands beyond the borders of our internal maps. We might be curious about what lies over these new horizons. We begin to set goals, often vague or generalized. Sometimes others are eager to push hard at this stage. However, this is still early in change; empathy, encouragement and active listening are more likely to support an individual in moving into the unknown.

Preparation: This is a pivotal step in change. Sometimes, in the enthusiasm of the contemplation stage, individuals leap into action without adequate preparation. Before we travel off our familiar map, we check to be sure that we have gas, supplies, emergency phone numbers, and the GPS. We will likely no longer have familiar road signs. In a similar way, we also prepare for behavioral change. This stage is a time for looking ahead and identifying resources. Setting specific measurable goals can become one of our new road signs. Often, early days in a treatment program provide an opportunity to respect the preparation stage.

Action: Several key elements support this action stage where plans are initiated. Good supports are essential, whether from existing relationships or by developing new connections, such as members of a 12-step fellowship. Do we experience traveling into this unknown territory with both guides and companions? We will not stay in an unfamiliar country if there is nothing to hold our interest or investment. Both finding healthy substitutions for old dysfunctional behaviors and reinforcing positive changes help a person to move through these action stages. Are we bringing a range of internal resources into our process of change: cognitive, emotional, physical, spiritual? Resources can include dealing with the stress of traveling into the unknown with regular exercise, a healthy diet, and time for relaxation. Are we growing in a spiritual life that offers nourishment to sustain us? Working with a trained spiritual director can be a vital support in the change process.

Maintenance: As we move into new territories, we can become homesick for what we left behind. The same dynamic can occur as we surrender problematic behaviors for healthy ones. One aspect of maintenance is recognizing how old patterns, however hurtful, also served us. Did we use alcohol to cover social anxieties? Did codependency mask low self-esteem? Are we minimizing small moves towards the border that will take us step-by-step back into our old country? One primary task of maintenance programs, such as 12-step groups or a detailed continuing care program, is to catch these small slips and to continually renew our commitment to positive changes. Maintenance programs also support new skills that make the old behaviors unnecessary.

Recycling: Change is a gradual process, and relapse is one of the common symptoms. When we find we’ve meandered back to our old neighborhood, do we stay there, or do we return to our new territories? When relapse occurs, does it lead to shame or does it become a growth opportunity? We integrate through our successes; we learn most from our mistakes. By working with an ongoing support group, an individual can remain aware of available resources and develop a plan for addressing relapses. In this context, mistakes will often lead to more detailed preparations and to new and more productive action steps.

When we are comfortable in our known territories, it is because we have spent sufficient time to recognize our way along these particular roads. The road to change takes time, planning, companions, and patience. With these resources, we continue to find fertile lands just over our horizon.

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LUKENOTES

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LUKENOTES is a quarterly publication of Saint Luke Institute · Tel. (301)445-7970 · lukenotes@slu.org · www.slu.org

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