



Stages of Change in Physical Activity

Behaviour change is a difficult thing. We all know how challenging it can be to quit smoking, lose weight or exercise regularly. Recently, health care professionals have studied how people successfully change from an unhealthy to a healthier lifestyle. We realize that achieving permanent behaviour change is a long and challenging process. People rarely change over night, but move through a stepwise progression toward change. The "[Transtheoretical Model](#)", developed by Prochaska and Colleagues, has identified [five stages](#) that individuals cycle through as they change specific "health-risk" behaviours. The model has been applied successfully to help people quit smoking and reduce their consumption of dietary fat. Recently, the model has shown promising results with respect to the adoption of exercise and physical activity.

The Stages of Change

According to the model, individuals cycle through five common stages as they move toward the adoption of a regular exercise program:

- **Precontemplation:** Precontemplators are not seriously considering changing their activity pattern in the next 6 months. They are very resistant to change and are often unaware that being sedentary is a problem.
"I currently do not exercise and do not intend to start in the next 6 months."
- **Contemplation:** Contemplators are aware that physical inactivity is a problem. They are seriously thinking about becoming more active but have not yet made a commitment to take action.
"I currently do not exercise but I am thinking about starting to exercise in the near future."
- **Preparation:** In the preparation stage, some behavioral change catches up with intention. Individuals want to take action in the next month and have successfully taken action in the last year.
"I currently exercise some, but not regularly."
- **Action:** The greatest observable change occurs in the action stage. People reach a level of exercise deemed to reduce health risk e.g. being active for a minimum of 20 mins. three times a week.
"I currently exercise regularly, but have only begun doing so in the last 6 months."
- **Maintenance:** In the maintenance stage, people have sustained their exercise behavior for at least 6 months.
"I currently exercise regularly, and have been doing so for more than 6 months."

Our goal as Exercise Specialists in the Healthy Heart Program is to help people move closer to, and eventually reach, the "maintenance stage" for exercise. We must identify participants current stage and tailor our "coaching" accordingly. We also help participants avoid relapse. Relapse occurs when people move back to a previous stage e.g. A Healthy Heart Program participant stops following his home exercise program, but intends to resume soon (action to preparation). Relapse is very common especially with in the first year of starting a regular exercise program. Our job is to help people return to their exercise program (action stage) without becoming demoralized.

Termination of this process of change occurs when a Healthy Heart Program participant has exercised regularly for 5 years and is no longer tempted by relapse. Well done!

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