

## Understanding the Process of Change By Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

We all have things about us that we'd like to change. So why does that seem so hard to accomplish and even harder to maintain? To paraphrase Lemony Snicket, people get changed like babies get changed—"awkwardly and often with a great deal of mess."

Despite the messiness involved, change does follow a predictable pattern. Researchers Prochaska and DiClemente identified four stages of change, each a preparation for the next. Understanding these transitions can help us better maintain our course of change. Here they are:

**Pre-contemplation:** Consider Clint—an imaginary college student and confirmed procrastinator. Before college, Clint was proud he could pull assignments out of a hat at the last minute. He told himself he worked better under pressure and he scored good grades.

**Stage 1, Contemplation:** However, after some college exams and papers came back with low marks, Clint realized his procrastination wasn't working well. But he couldn't relinquish his late video nights and considered afternoon skiing a birthright. Nevertheless, there was this emerging awareness that his recreation and his hopes to become an engineer weren't jiving. Wishing for a quick fix, he talked to a counselor who suggested he create a list of pros and cons, then consider whether there were ways around the cons. Could he just play video games and ski on weekends? Could he study in blocks, interspersed with fun? Clint changed nothing for months, in part because he doubted he could actually control his habits.

**Stage 2, Preparation:** In a moment of courage, Clint committed to change then formulated his plan of attack. He told his parents about his grades, shared his plan for modifying his habits, and asked them to check on him weekly. He also asked roommates to eject him from video games at midnight, except on weekends. He posted a study schedule and asked not to be interrupted during study hours. He had to keep reassuring himself he could do this. He set a day to start and plunged in.

**Stage 3, Action:** Surprisingly, carrying out the plan was easy—initially. Clint's studying surged and test results began showing it. But soon he found himself running into his old nemesis—boredom. He had to keep reminding himself of the goal and why it was worth it. He talked himself through distractions saying, "C'mon Clint, just 25 more minutes and you can play for an hour." He offered to pay any roommate \$5 who caught him off-schedule and, after losing about \$50, was studying by the clock.

**Stage 4, Maintenance:** Researchers say after sustaining a new behavior for six months, you're in maintenance. The challenge becomes to integrate your changes into your lifestyle. Clint ultimately chose to live with other roommates who were

less party oriented. He decided to forego next season's ski pass so he wouldn't feel he was wasting money by studying.

**Relapse Prevention:** Despite great intentions, Clint messed up. The counselor told him relapse was an expected part of change, not a failure. Instead of getting down on himself, Clint accepted relapse as an indication that there were holes in his dike that needed attention. His transformation wasn't easy but was worth it. Thomas Carlisle said, "Nothing builds self-esteem and self-confidence like accomplishment."