

## Basics of Behavior Change

Just hearing that diabetes can be prevented or delayed may help some people change. But even the most motivated people need help to get on their own road to health.

Change means breaking old habits, which is hard for most of us to do. The first step in talking about healthy lifestyle choices is to find out what stage of change a person is in on the path to preventing diabetes.

### Stages of Change

In the book *Changing for Good\**, James Prochaska outlines six stages of change.

- 1) Precontemplation, or denial
- 2) Contemplation – beginning to acknowledge a problem
- 3) Preparation – planning to take action
- 4) Action – modifying previous action
- 5) Maintenance – sustaining new behavior
- 6) Termination – the new behavior has become a habit

**The information below describes the six stages of change and how people might react when they are in a specific stage.**

**1) Precontemplation.** In this stage, people don't want to admit they need to make some lifestyle changes. Since they aren't thinking about making changes, they don't listen to suggestions about what to do. This difficult stage is often called "denial." These people are not likely to make changes quickly. You can plant the seeds of change by pointing out benefits that prompt a person to move to the next stage.

**2) Contemplation.** In this stage, people think about changing but often focus on barriers to change. These people are aware of the need to change and the benefits of change. Your job is to help them think of change. Don't tell them what you think they should do. To succeed, they need to learn to solve their own problems. You can help by supporting the desire to change. Work with these people to think of solutions to the barriers.

**3) Preparation.** "OK, this is it. I am really going to do it." People are ready but need help to make a plan and arrange support. Have they made a realistic plan and a backup plan? Have they set up a support system (for example, asking family and friends for help, or joining a support group)? This stage is a "tipping point," where a few words of encouragement can lead to action. It is important to plan for success and not just jump into action.

**4) Action.** People who have begun to make changes still need support. What positive and negative feedback are they receiving? How do family and friends react to the changes? Without positive feedback, people can slide back into earlier stages. You can help. Note ways that change brings benefit. Praise any change, no matter how small. Boost their ego. Recognizing accomplishments is important. Get support from family, friends, and others. Warn participants that lapses—such as overeating or skipping healthy routines—can happen and should be regarded as a temporary stumble, not a disaster.

**5) Maintenance.** You can help people maintain healthy changes by asking how their life has improved. Do they have more energy, wear a smaller size, or feel more confident? Have others noticed a change? This is also a stage where people may make the mistake of viewing a lapse in healthy behavior as a complete return to old habits. Treat a lapse as a temporary delay in progress. Ask, “What can you learn from this?” and “What can you do to prevent future lapses?”

**6) Termination.** At this stage, the new behavior has become a habit. The new behavior has come to feel so natural to you that you forget to give yourself credit for it. When a person reaches the Termination stage, they can use this new habit to ask themselves: “How can I use what I’ve learned to create other changes in my life?”

\* Prochaska JO, Norcross JC, DiClemente, CC. Changing for Good: a Revolutionary Six Stage Program for Overcoming Bad Habits and Moving Your Life Positively Forward. New York: Avon Books; 1994.

Knowing what stage of change a person is in is important so you can help most effectively. Here are some specific examples of what you might hear and how you can respond. More ideas are in the free NDEP *Game Plan* health care provider toolkit, which you can order using the NDEP order form on page 21 of *The Road to Health Resource Guide*.

What the person might say	How you can help
“I don’t like to exercise.”	Focus on activities the person likes to do. Ask him/her if (s) he can see a benefit that relates to this activity. You can prompt if necessary. For example, you could say, “Many people find that they are less out of breath when they start walking more. Is there anything you’d like to do but don’t because you are out of breath?”
“I like my food the way it is! I’m not going to eat all those twigs and leaves.”	Point out other health benefits: “Eating more vegetables will help with constipation.” Or social benefits: “Do you worry about what your children eat? Do you think eating more fruits and vegetables at home would be a good example for them?”

What the person might say	How you can help
“I’d like to eat healthier, but there’s no way my family would like me cooking like that.”	Help the person challenge assumptions. Some barriers go away simply by asking for help. “Have you thought about asking them? Tell them why you want to make these changes. There’s no harm in asking.”
“I’d like to, but you don’t understand. Who will watch the children while I am out taking a walk?”	Help brainstorm about barriers, but don’t provide solutions; it is best if the person comes up with his own. “Can you do anything so you get some time to take care of yourself?”
“I’ve got my walking shoes and I’m headed to the track tomorrow!”	Offer praise. Check for realistic plans. You may need to suggest setting some short-term goals to win early success. “That’s great! How far do you plan to walk tomorrow?”
“We have lots of fruits and veggies in the fridge now.”	Offer praise. Enlist support. “Fantastic. Have you thought about inviting some friends over to enjoy some of these new foods, or bringing a salad to the church supper?”
“We had a salad with dinner every night last week.”	Offer praise. Probe for problems. “Terrific! How did your family feel about that?”
“I guess I fell off the wagon. I had a cheeseburger last night. I don’t think I can do this.”	Remind the person that a slip-up is not a disaster. “Well, everyone needs a treat sometimes. Why do you think you can’t do this? What can you do next time you get a craving for a cheeseburger?”
“I’ve got a buddy and we walk almost every day.”	Offer praise. Build increased support. “That’s great! What’s your plan if your buddy is sick or out of town and can’t go with you on a walk?”
”I’ve made the change. Now what else can I work on for a better, healthier life?”	Help people identify other areas in their life where they may want to change their behavior. Set realistic expectations.

Remember, no matter how small a step, moving from one stage to the next is a success. Most people won’t leap from Precontemplation or Contemplation to Action. And sometimes people slide backward. Don’t be discouraged. Ask what worked and what didn’t, but stay focused on the positive.