

Understanding Substance Use

How Do People Change?

Stopping or reducing substance use can be a difficult process. As well as your loved one's behaviour, there will be other areas in their life they may have to change. The 'cycle of change' (adapted from Prochaska & Di Clemente) is commonly used in treatment services to show the process of change.

There is no timescale for each stage, as this depends on the individual. Positive progress may be made or lapses backwards can happen. It is normal to go around the cycle several times to achieve lasting, stable change.

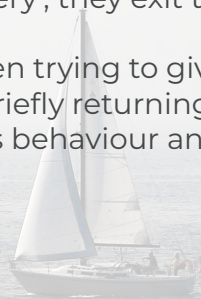
For someone to stop or reduce their substance use, they need to believe that the positives of changing outweigh the negatives. You cannot force someone to make changes. Someone's motivation to change can be influenced by:

- Knowledge about the situation and their options
- Their skills and/or their support network
- Self-belief that they are able to make changes
- Belief that things will improve if changes are made
- Self-esteem (feeling of self-worth and value)

Stages of Change

- **Pre-Contemplation** - here we have someone who is not aware or concerned that their substance use is an issue. It would appear to them to be under control or purely recreational. There is no desire to change and they don't see their behaviour as problematic, even if others do.
- **Contemplation** - they're thinking about change. On the one hand, they enjoy using substances, and on the other they are starting to experience problems. There are consequences of substance use – legal, financial, medical, family.
- **Preparation** - they are ready and determined to change, the negative consequences of their behaviour now outweigh any benefits. They are prepared to make changes.
- **Action** - practical steps are taken to change their substance use, such as cutting down or stopping altogether.
- **Maintenance** - keeping new behaviour going, have cut down or stopped taking substances. When this has continued over a long-term period, they say they no longer have a problem or they are in 'recovery', they exit the cycle.

Lapses and **relapses** are common when trying to give up substances. People can lapse back a step at any stage of the cycle, briefly returning to previous behaviour. A relapse is when they fully return to their previous behaviour and need to go through the cycle of change again.



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Understanding the Process of Change

Change is a process and it takes time. Believing that change is possible in the longer term is a great source of hope.

By identifying where a loved one is in the cycle, you may better understand what support to offer, and what support you need for yourself.

- **Not thinking about it (pre-contemplation)** – there is no desire to change and they may just ignore anyone who suggests that what they are doing is dangerous or harmful. You can speak to them about your concerns and feelings, and how their behaviour is affecting you. It is important they become aware of the consequences of their behaviour.
- **Thinking about it (contemplation)** – some negative consequences of their behaviour may cause them to consider making changes. You can highlight they do have choices and help them to explore their options. Prevent your loved one from avoiding responsibility for any of their behaviour.
- **Preparing for change (preparation)** – a crucial step. They have decided they want to make changes. A word of warning - some may only say they are stopping or reducing their substance use to avoid confrontation with the family. You can support their decision and acknowledge their worries about being able to make changes.
- **Doing it (action)** – they do what they have decided. This can involve reducing substance use, starting treatment, changing their environment, or abstinence (no substances). You can recognise what they are doing and encourage them to believe they can change.
- **Keeping it going (maintenance)** – you can continue with support and encouragement, let them know how far they've come.
- **Lapse and relapse** – lapses are common and can happen at any time in the cycle and are normally temporary. A relapse is when they revert back to an earlier pattern of substance use and need to go through the cycle again. Triggers such as a stressful event or being in a tempting environment can make someone vulnerable to relapse, even after years of abstinence. You can be positive, encourage them to feel they can try again.

