

# Stages of Change

## I want to change but...

There's more to changing than just doing something different. Change is a process. Deciding to do something different, like stopping using drugs, is just the beginning.

Researchers have identified 6 stages people go through when trying to make a change. It doesn't always happen one after the other. Often people go backwards and forwards between the steps, learning new things each time that will eventually help them to make a permanent change.

### 1. Pre-contemplation ( 'Get off my back')

The person doesn't believe they have a problem, and doesn't want to change. The advantages of using drugs outweigh the disadvantages. Others may be concerned about the person's drug use, but attempts to help them to change fall on deaf ears. 'I haven't got a problem, I only use drugs at weekends.' 'My mum thinks I've got a problem, but she just doesn't understand me.'

#### What can you do at this stage?

You can't push, bribe, or force a person into the next stage. There will be resistance to explanations about 'how to give up.' Find out all you can about the drug they are using. Relevant information about risks and safer using may be well received.

### 2. Contemplation ( 'I think something's wrong.')

The person is beginning to think about their drug use and starts to think about change. The balance of advantage/disadvantage begins to shift, although the person may appear not interested in change.

'I used to have fun when I drank, but not anymore. I need help but don't know if I can stop.' 'I should give up cannabis because of all the problems, but what will I do instead? I'll miss all my friends.'

#### What can you do at this stage?

Help them to explore the advantages and disadvantages of giving up. Listen and help them decide whether to change. Avoid arguing or telling them what to do. Ask questions like 'Is there anything I can do to help?' Build on positives to increase confidence.

### 3. Preparation/determination (Don't do today what you can still put off till tomorrow')

The person decides they really want to change their drug use. The reality of quitting is becoming a little easier to face, although there are still doubts. The person has decided to take action, and has confidence in their ability to change. This is often the planning stage – 'How will I do it?'

### **What can you do at this stage?**

Support and encourage. Find out what help is available and explore options with the user. Help to set achievable goals.

### **4. Action (Here it goes')**

The person changes by quitting or cutting down. He starts to do different things, and realises there is a life outside their drug use. Activities that seemed boring don't seem so bad now. He will begin to feel better, although initial withdrawals will be difficult.

#### **What can you do?**

Help with the physical withdrawals (e.g. lots of healthy food, vitamins). Encourage new experiences. Look towards the future – skills training etc. Accept small achievements with pride.

### **5. Maintenance ('Keep on going')**

The person keeps to their goals – abstinence or lower levels of use. If changes are maintained for 6 months or more there are usually substantial changes in the quality of life (Housing, employment, health, relationships). If the person stops using without making other changes in lifestyle then he will be more likely to slip back into old patterns. If he is happy with what he is doing relapse is less likely.

#### **What can you do?**

Try to encourage them to talk about the positive reasons for changing, and help to reinforce their decision. Invite new friends round. Let them talk about the difficulties they face e.g. meeting old friends at parties, declining a joint, Offer to help with practical problems e.g. advocacy with housing dept. BUT don't take over – encourage individual's responsibility.

### **6. Relapse (Just one puff won't do any harm....')**

The person returns to drug use or increased use, after a period of change. It can be a one off, or could be more regular use. It is quite common. Few manage to go round the circle completely just once. Often they may feel they can handle the odd joint now, or feel something is lacking and are looking to fill the void.

#### **What can you do?**

Assist them to see the process as a learning experience. Help them to develop strategies to overcome the issues involved with going back to their drug use. They will feel disappointed and that they have let you down – draw attention to how much they had achieved, let them know you appreciate the process was difficult, but remind them they succeeded once and can do so again.

Then wait until they are ready to start again – may enter circle at a different stage.