Behavior Change

It sure is busy at the gym lately! This happens every January; people resolve to “work out more in the new year.” But as January turns to February, the new healthy behavior we all planned to adopt becomes another New Year’s Resolution disappointment. You don’t have to wait until next January 1 to try again. You can resolve to make a positive behavior change any time of year, and do it more effectively with a better understanding of the steps to success.

Psychologists and researchers have identified six stages that most people go through when making a behavior change. Whether it is substance use reduction, diet change, or exercise, we all go through the same six stages. Known as the “Stages of Change” model, this understanding of the change process can help us implement change in a way that is successful and long lasting.

Stages of Change:

1. PRECONTEMPLATION is the stage at which there is no intention to change behavior. Many individuals in this stage are unaware of their problems. Some people call this phase "denial." If you are in this stage, ask yourself some questions. Do you have an inkling that your behavior is not healthy? How do you recognize when you have a problem? What would happen if you defined this behavior as a problem?

2. CONTEMPLATION is the stage in which people are aware that a problem exists, but have not yet made a commitment to take action. At this stage, people become more and more aware of the benefits of making a change, but may feel the change has too many “cons”. During this stage, ask yourself: What are the “pros” of making a change? What might be preventing you from changing? What are some things that could help you make this change?

3. PREPARATION may be the most important stage as it sets the groundwork for success. Over half of people who skip this stage will relapse within a month! Write down your goals. Preparation involves, planning, goal setting and information gathering. During this stage, you might begin by making small changes to prepare for a larger, more comprehensive change.

4. ACTION is the stage in which individuals begin to modify their behavior. During this time, it’s important to pay a lot of attention to the plan you created in Step 3. What part of the plan is working and what needs tweaking? It’s helpful during this stage to review your motivations, and be patient as the change is not yet a habit.

5. MAINTENANCE is the stage in which behavior change can start to become a habit. However, things will likely not go perfectly and setbacks should be anticipated. As the next stage describes, relapses are common and are a part of the process of making a lifelong change.

6. RELAPSE into past behaviors is common. When you go through a relapse, you might experience feelings of failure and pessimism. But don’t let that totally derail you. Just return to stage 3. Start planning again with new tools and strategies to stay on track. This time, ask yourself why the relapse happened? What triggered the relapse? What can you do to avoid these triggers in the future?

Change is a journey through successes and setbacks. If you can stay focused on the long term goal, forgive yourself for “messing up”, and adopt new tools and techniques, healthy behaviors can become a lifestyle.

If you are struggling to adopt a behavior change, give Family Services EAP a call for free, confidential counseling ... 978-327-6666 or info@FamilyServicesEAP.org.