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Cha Cha Cha Changes....

I'm a fan of Bob Newhart. His quiet sense of humor and dry delivery are comedy gold from a different time. Bob performs in a 2001 *Mad TV* clip as a psychiatrist who tries to help a patient overcome her fears. His advice? He yells, "Stop IT!" at the patient. Funny? Sure. Effective? Not so much.

Life would be pretty grand if it was that simple to overcome our fears, anxieties, bad habits and compulsions. Unfortunately, we know it's not that simple. In fact, it can be downright difficult and frustrating to gain control over a health issue or problem that has dominated our lives.

One of my favorite theoretical approaches is Transtheoretical Change Theory (Prochaska, Norcross and DiClemente, 1994). This theory can be applied to improving study habits, quitting smoking, finding time to exercise more, reducing stress and gaining better control over unhealthy eating habits. The concepts are universally helpful when looking to answer the question "Why don't we change our behavior?" The approach outlines how people move through various stages before becoming ready to make lasting change in their lives.

Think about a behavior you have tried to change in your life. This can be something you are currently struggling with or something you have tried to change in the past.

Here is a quick overview of the model. Keep your example in mind as you move through the stages:

- **Pre-contemplation:** At this stage, you are unaware that there is a problem and haven't thought much about change. This stage is one of the most challenging from which to move. When you are in the pre-contemplation stage, you do not realize that your behavior is causing problems. Change will be difficult until you are able to move from pre-contemplation to contemplation. Friends, colleagues and family may know you have a problem, but it has not yet come to your attention.
- **Contemplation:** This is the most common stage of change for people to experience. You have thought about change and are getting ready for movement in the near future. You realize the current behavior isn't in your best interest, but you aren't quite ready to begin a plan of change. You aren't happy with your current state and want things to be different, but you aren't ready to explore another way or take action to make change in your life.
- **Preparation for Action:** In this stage, you are aware of a problem and are ready to actively create goals to address the negative behavior in your life. Plans and goals should be focused, short term, designed for updating or altering, and measurable.
- **Action:** This stage of change is where you put your plan into action in order to transform behavior. You attempt to alter your negative behaviors and develop new positive behaviors to replace them.
- **Maintenance and Relapse Prevention:** Here the goal is to continue successful plans and repeat those actions that work, while adjusting for setbacks. Change has occurred and there has been a reduction in problem behavior. You maintain your successful change and reduce the risk of falling

back into bad habits. If you are unable to maintain your change, you can instead relapse and need to start the process again.

This approach offers insight when trying to understand our bad habits. You can immediately identify some unhealthy behaviors you have previously overcome and can relate to this theory. You can also identify a few problems that are currently in different stages of the change model.

I find this theory helpful both for our own personal growth as prevention educators, as well as a parallel process tool useful in sharing with students how they can take ownership of their behavior and subsequent change. At its heart, this model supports the two-steps-forward, one-step-back approach that often permeates our attempts at change.

Next month, we will talk more about how to move between these stages of change. I will attempt to answer the question, "So I'm stuck at contemplation, how do I move up to preparation or action?" I will also discuss some ways to apply this model to students we encounter who become stuck in their unhealthy behaviors.

Reference:

Prochaska, J., Norcross, J. & DiClemente, C. (1994). *Changing for Good*. New York: HarperCollins.

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