

## Addiction Treatment Must Foster Change and Growth

### Stages of Change: a Christian Perspective

Jenny Sheetz, MA, CN, LMT, Founder and Clinical Director, St. Joseph Institute

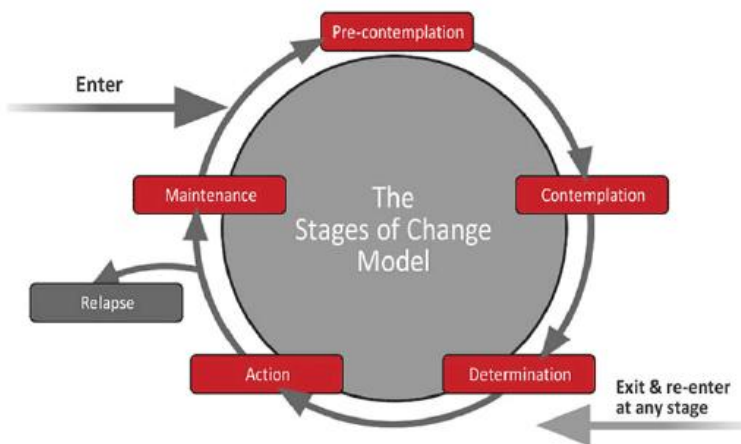


Since the development of the model for the Stages of Change as it was presented by DiClemente in 1991, this model has been adapted and used in a variety of contexts, including medicine, counseling and addiction treatment. Determining a person's Stage of

Change provides insight into their readiness to change. Based on this fundamental awareness, professionals who work with this model are able to facilitate changes in mindset, attitude and behavior as they work with patients or clients who are in need of change.

The Stages of Change as developed by DiClemente included five distinct stages:

- ❖ **Pre-Contemplation:** Avoiding problem behavior by failing to recognize it or refusing to consider change.
- ❖ **Contemplation:** Acknowledging that there is a problem but struggling with ambivalence. It can be seen as sitting on the fence. The struggle at this stage involves weighing the pros and cons and considering the benefits and barriers to change.
- ❖ **Preparation/Determination:** Taking steps and getting ready to change. Getting engaged in the process and preparing to take action.
- ❖ **Action/Willpower:** Making the change and living the new behaviors, which is an all-consuming activity that influences a person's lifestyle in profound ways.
- ❖ **Maintenance:** Continuing to integrate the behavioral changes learned.



The early stages of the process focus on thinking about change and they are characterized by reflecting on the possibility of the need for change; while the later stages involve taking action and engaging in the process of making changes and sustaining the progress that has been made.

This model is useful in helping those who suffer from addiction assess their own readiness to engage in recovery for the first time. Following the natural progression provided by the model takes individuals through the process of change: considering change, preparing for change, making change and sustaining change. Those who successfully complete this process recognize that ongoing work is required to sustain the change. People who are actively engaged in their recovery will tell you that they work at staying clean and sober. It is a process that requires effort.

DiClemente's model is enlightening and useful. However, it has a limitation that causes those who suffer from addiction to be more prone to relapse. The Maintenance Stage focuses on integrating the behavior patterns that have been learned. Integration of what has been learned is an essential part of the process of change. The old adage that says "practice makes perfect" is true. We need to practice what we have learned. However, if that is all we do, we can be limited in our progress by two distinct pitfalls.

Doing the same things over and over again can become monotonous, boring and discouraging. These are all characteristics that lead to relapse.

Life, as God designed it, is a developmental process. It is dynamic and evolutionary. We were not created to keep the status quo. We were created to participate in God's plan and continue the natural process of human growth and development. Maintenance fails to honor that process, leaving us empty and unfulfilled.

Considering the negative impact of these two important pitfalls, I suggest that the final stage in the Stages of Change model offered by DiClemente needs to include Growth as well as Maintenance. Growth allows us to be open to the promptings of

the Holy Spirit in our lives. It keeps us attuned to God's plan of ongoing evolution in our process of personal development. It inspires curiosity which sets our hearts on fire and provides motivation for moving forward in life. This prevents boredom and reduces the likelihood of relapse.

This Growth Stage is a key ingredient for those who suffer from addiction AND for their loved ones or "support people." We must first acknowledge that DiClemente's model serves family members and other support people in several ways. Using the first stage of his model, Pre-contemplation, helps support people understand when change is a realistic expectation OR an up-hill battle that is beyond the realm of possibility in this moment. Proper understanding and intervention at the Contemplation Stage can facilitate greater awareness of the problem and lead to a commitment to change. This knowledge and skill development can create an attitude of hope rather than exasperation and futility for family members of those who are troubled by addiction.

The later stages of change as presented by DiClemente – Preparation, Action and Maintenance – are important concepts for family and friends because they pertain to the type of support that needs to be offered to the person who is struggling with addiction. Support people need to get ready for change as well. They are part of the unhealthy dynamic that fuels or solidifies the addictive process. They need to assess how they are part of the destructive behaviors that created or continue to perpetuate the addiction. Change needs to be a significant part of their lives as well. They need to take Action in identifying their behaviors and make a plan to change how they live and interact with the loved one who is suffering from addiction. When the treatment phase is nearing completion all parties need to discuss their individual plans and

concur on a mutual plan that helps them enter into the Maintenance Stage together.

Once these nuts and bolts of recovery have been hammered out and put into place, their new life together starts to take shape. A new structure is formed that gives the family a new order and sense of discipline that anchors them in their process of change. A family is a living, breathing organism and it needs time to adjust to the change process. Once the initial changes are solidified, the family needs to engage in a process of Growth that will bring them closer together as a family unit and help them see how their family can continue to heal and grow. The model of the Holy Family – Jesus, Mary and Joseph – can become an image of family unity as well as an example of how to live.

The spiritual tools provided by the Christian faith can be used as sources of inspiration and motivation to fuel the important Growth that needs to occur to help families in recovery continue to move forward in their lives. As individuals and children of God we are guided by the Holy Spirit. As families we can look to the model given to us by the Holy Family as an example for how we bond and interact with others.

Those who embrace and practice the Christian faith are familiar with the process of conversion. We have learned to accept the reality that we are separated from God due to our sinful nature and that our earthly journey is a process through which we acknowledge our need to be reunited to God through the salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ. This is the fundamental process of change that God offers to us as part of our life experience. As we live lives of faith, we engage in this process. AND it is a process. Christians are not perfect. Instead, we strive to become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

This fundamental way of life that is practiced by authentic Christians provides an experiential understanding of the process of change. The process we engage in during our Christian conversion allows us to adopt a pattern of change in our lives. This same pattern of change can then be used to positively influence how we enter into the journey of recovery. The life skills we learn through the practice of our Christian faith can be transferred into the process of recovery.

The parable of the Sower and the Seed is presented in all three synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23; Mark 4:3-8,14-20; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15). Thus, in taking us on our spiritual journey through the Gospel, Jesus has us take note of this particular story as we embark on our journey with him, indicating its importance in our path of spiritual development. The following table is an integration of the Stages of Change, the parable of the Sower and the Seed, and the process of change that is part of our faith journey as Christian as well as the process of change that is part of the journey we can make in recovery from addiction. The elements presented in the table are intended to provide food for thought – seeds for your reflection.

The table is followed by two sections that offer bullet points for further reflection, including Recovery Benefits Shared by People of Faith and Benefits of Joining the Recovery Community at St.

Joseph Institute. In developing and implementing our program of addiction treatment, we have endeavored to pull together the best practices in behavioral health and integrate them with the fundamentals of our Christian faith to create a strong program that reflects God’s plan for our lives. We believe that by following the design of his plan we offer a solid foundation in recovery that mirrors the journey we are called to take as Christians.

We are all called to walk with Christ. There are times when we stand erect and walk beside him, and there are times when we fall. It is the times when we find ourselves “face down” that we often have an opportunity to learn our greatest lessons. Addiction puts us face down, often filled with guilt and shame and fear. For Christians this can be especially difficult because we want to be a model for others – serving as an example of those who live good lives in imitation of the Lord. The reality is that we are wounded and broken, and we are in need of a Savior. Jesus came to teach us to be meek and humble of heart, accepting our weaknesses and failings and trusting that he will heal us and make us whole. Addiction causes us to fall, and Jesus helps us stand up again and learn to humbly walk by his side as we follow the path of recovery. This is the message of hope we offer at St. Joseph Institute for Addiction.

## A Christian Approach to Change Stages of Change / Parable of the Sower and the Seed

| Stage of Change                       | Type of Soil   | Worldview on Addiction   | Worldview on Faith   |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>Pre-Contemplation</b>              | <b>Path</b> – seeds are eaten by birds   | Denial of addiction<br>Belief no change is needed<br>Attached to drinking lifestyle  | Denial of God<br>Hostile toward God<br>Belief in Self  |
| <b>Contemplation</b>                  | <p><b>Rocky soil</b> – seed germinates but withers due to lack of roots</p> <p><b>Thorns</b> – seed grows up and is choked by thorns</p> <p><b>Fertile Soil</b> – seed flourishes and orients you toward a new way of life. You see that way of life as a possibility for you.</p> | <p>False starts in recovery. No real desire to stop.</p> <p>Pulled back to Pre-Contemplation due to ambivalence and lack of commitment to change. Influenced by friends or by the voice of your disease.</p> <p>You see that others have found a better way, perhaps through a 12 step group. If that way is possible for them, it is possible for you too. You have HOPE to enter this new path.</p>  | <p>False starts in faith journey. No desire to live differently.</p> <p>Pulled back to Pre-Contemplation due to ambivalence and lack of commitment to change. Lured by the riches and pleasures of this world.</p> <p>Christian images begin to take root in you. You see God as your Father and Jesus as the Son of God and your brother in faith. Jesus is the vine and you are a branch whose life can be developed and sustained by your relationship with him. You learn that it is possible to hold on to him and trust in his goodness. This reality gives you HOPE to enter this new path.</p> |
| <b>Preparation/<br/>Determination</b> | <b>Fertile Soil</b> – You are willing to explore this new way.   | You enter into some type of treatment program or try to sustain sobriety under your own power.   | You enter a faith community and begin to worship with others and learn about their faith.  |
| <b>Action</b>                         | <b>Fertile Soil</b> – You learn to walk in this new way.   | You continue on the new path. Learn skills. Practice those skills until they become a new way of life.   | You continue to walk in the ways of the Lord. Know and practice what the Master taught.  |
| <b>Maintenance/Growth</b>             | <b>Fertile Soil</b> – You continue to till the garden and plant new seeds of awareness and growth.   | You continue to walk in this new way, practicing all the skills that were learned and eventually inspiring others to see and walk in this new way.   | You become a disciple (follower) of the Lord – or perhaps an apostle (one who is sent into the world by God to do his work).   |
| <b>Relapse</b>                        | The ground gives way beneath you due to external burdens or internal wounds/weaknesses. You fall under the weight of the distress caused by the burdens/wounds.  | <p>There will be times when you slip and briefly revert back to your old pattern. Then you gather your resources (inner strength and support from others) and reclaim your position on the path.</p> <p>There may be times when you experience a devastating hit that results in a full-blown relapse. This creates doubt in your ability to sustain recovery. You become ambivalent and apathetic in your recovery, and you find yourself returning to the Contemplation stage. This is where you must decide to begin again.</p> | You learn to walk the way of the cross and discover that falls are a way of life. They provide lessons for you to learn and grow in your faith. They inspire humility and tear down the pride that is often associated with the fall. An attitude change can bring you once again to experience Determination based on the belief that you can endure and carry on with God's help.  |

## Recovery Benefits Shared by People of Faith:

- ❖ Have gone through the process of change and are therefore knowledgeable about the process. They can transfer this skill into their process of recovery from addiction.
- ❖ Have the power of cognitive dissonance (internal conflict between what they are doing and what they want to be doing) to highlight the ambivalence in their lives that has been caused by their addiction. This ambivalence creates an impetus to change.
- ❖ Have knowledge of God and have “put on the mind of Christ” to give them hope and direction for their journey in recovery, once they get past the guilt and shame for having offended God. They have an opportunity to learn to depend on God to help them in their recovery.

## Benefits in Joining the Recovery Community at St. Joseph Institute:

- ❖ Those in **Contemplation** need sacred space with fertile soil because they ...
  - Need a protected space in which to continue processing the ambivalence they are just beginning to recognize in their lives.
  - Need people to serve as anchors to inspire change for them, and help them move to the next step in the change process –

feeling the determination to prepare for ACTION.

- Are severely distracted and taken off course by the influence of those who are still in Pre-Contemplation. This is like seed planted among the thorns that grow up and choke the young plant.
- ❖ Those in **Preparation** need a sacred space to:
  - Identify their specific needs regarding how to best enter the action stage.
  - Solidify their determination and develop a firm resolve to take action.
- ❖ Those in the **Action** stage need:
  - A place that is conducive to the change process and supports the person who has chosen to make the change.
  - A place to learn and practice the healthy skills that will be required to support and sustain the new lifestyle they are trying to cultivate.
  - A place that will provide them with a solid foundation in recovery and helps them create a plan that will enable them to continue their journey of recovery as they complete the Action stage and enter into Maintenance.
  - A place that will help them learn to identify the underlying contributing factors to their addiction so they can immediately

recognize, and successfully handle, triggers that could cause them to Relapse.

- A place that is willing to include family members and other support people in the process of establishing a solid foundation on the road to recovery.

❖ Those who are in the **Maintenance/Growth** stage need:

- Encouragement when life gets difficult.
- A network of people who are working together toward a solid recovery.
- Contact with professionals who will continue to support their recovery efforts and redirect them when they start to go astray or let their motivation for aftercare fade.
- Knowledge that there is a safe place where recovery is real and attainable.
- Knowledge that there are people who care about them and pray for them every day.

❖ Those who fall into **Relapse** need:

- People who will be understanding and listen to the story of their Relapse without judging them.
- People who will help lift their burdens and find healing for their wounds.
- People who will encourage them to re-enter the process of change by embracing

the lessons they learned during Relapse.

- People who will help them identify what has worked for them in the past and focus on strengthening those patterns.
- People who will help them acknowledge their old patterns of weakness and make a plan to address those weaknesses as part of their ongoing recovery.