



# Substance use – stages of change model

## Stages of change model – general descriptions

When someone has problematic alcohol or other drug use, it takes a number of steps to recover. Gaining an understanding of where someone is in the cycle of change can help determine what interventions are likely to be most effective. For example, someone in the 'pre-contemplation' stage is happy using and is unlikely to respond to advice on the harms of use. At this stage, interventions that focus on reducing harm from use are the only likely productive steps. Motivational counselling at the various stages of change can be a helpful strategy in assisting the individual to go through with the particular change they are wanting to make.

## The six stages of change

### Pre-contemplation

These are the 'happy users'. They are unconcerned about their drug use behaviour and will tend to ignore or discount anyone else's belief that what they are doing is hazardous or harmful. For them, the positives, or benefits, of the behaviour outweigh any costs or adverse consequences. Hence they are happy to continue using.

### Contemplation

Contemplators are people who feel two ways about their behaviour. On the one hand it is an enjoyable, exciting and pleasurable activity. But, on the other hand, they are starting to experience some adverse consequences. These may be personal, psychological, legal, medical, social or family problems. They are ambivalent about their drug use. It is good because of the benefits, but they are also worried by the increasing costs.

### Determination/preparation

Those in this stage are ripe for change in their behaviour. They believe that the costs clearly outweigh the benefits. They know that change is necessary and that the time for change is imminent. However, some people do not progress to the next stage.

#### Action

People in this stage have resolved to change and have committed themselves to that process. They have embarked on a road to change their drug use.

#### Maintenance

People in this stage have successfully abandoned their drug behaviour and have sustained the change for a sufficient period to state that they no longer have problems with drug use. This stage generally occurs at least six months after the behaviour has changed. It is believed that people are maintainers for up to five years, whereupon they become emotionally and physically detached from the old behaviour. In exceptional cases people seem able to distance themselves from their drug use much more quickly.

#### Relapse

This is a process that can occur during the action and maintenance stages. Many people who change their behaviour resume drug use or return to old patterns of behaviour. People who have relapsed may have consciously changed their minds or simply slipped back into old habits. They generally revert to one of the previous stages. It is also important to distinguish a lapse (a one-off or short term return to use) from a relapse.

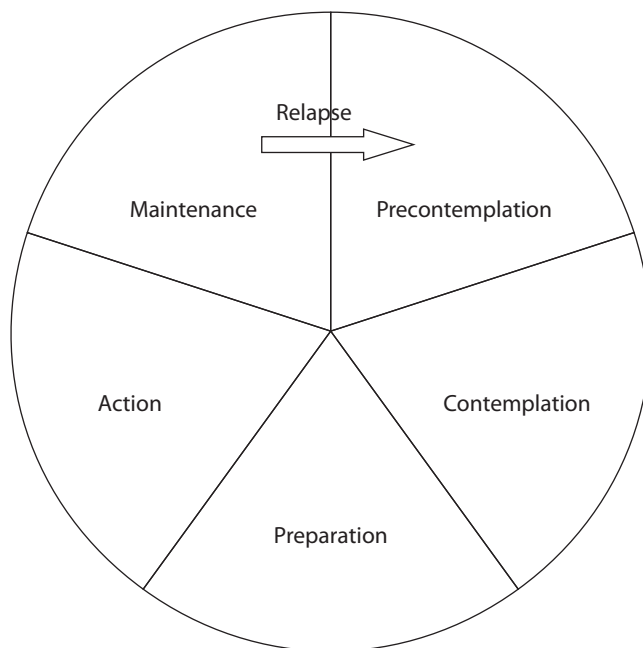
Source: Turning Point/NCETA Training Program 1997 Participants' Workbook, Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre, Victoria.

## Stages of change – summary

STAGE	Characteristics
Precontemplation	The person is unaware or barely aware that there is a problem, the cons of giving up outweigh pros, there is no intent to change drug-using in the foreseeable future.
Contemplation	The person acknowledges that there is a problem, are open to information and education, are considering change but are not quite ready, and are considering the pros and cons of giving up.
Preparation	There is an intention to give up the drugs, the person is beginning to set goals and plans, and strategies are developed.
Action	Significant efforts are made to stop using drugs.
Relapse	The person uses drugs again. This is seen as a learning opportunity – a chance to learn what strategies did not work, and what part of the plan did not work.
Maintenance	The person continues to abstain from drugs. The person is able to more clearly identify situations and self-defeating behaviours that encourage relapse. They continue to work to prevent relapse.

## Relapse

- It is important to note that people can move back and forward through these stages
- Slips or relapses occur when people who have moved into the action stage change their minds and slip back into their previous drug use
- Relapses are common when people are trying to give up drugs
- Relapses have traditionally been viewed as failures and time to start over again
- A better way to view a relapse is as a learning opportunity – a way for people to see what part of their strategy or plan to give up drugs is not working or needs improvement
- When people relapse they go back to one of the earlier stages of the model.



## Useful references

- Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia  
[www.mifa.org.au](http://www.mifa.org.au)
- Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria  
[www.mifellowship.org](http://www.mifellowship.org)
- Mental Health Services Website (Vic)  
[www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth)
- National Alliance of the Mentally Ill (NAMI) (USA)  
[www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)
- Mental Health Council of Australia  
[www.mhca.com.au](http://www.mhca.com.au)
- SANE Australia  
[www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)
- Beyond Blue  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- Australian Drug Foundation  
[www.adf.org.au](http://www.adf.org.au)
- Family Drug and Alcohol Helpline  
1300 660 068
- Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia fact sheets
- Family and carer supports and services
- Understanding dual diagnosis
- What can friends and family do to help a person experiencing mental illness?
- Bipolar disorder and alcohol and drug use



Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia  
08 8221 5072 [www.mifa.org.au](http://www.mifa.org.au)  
Mental Illness Fellowship of  
Sth Australia Inc  
08 8221 5160 [www.mifsa.org.au](http://www.mifsa.org.au)

Mental Health Carers NT  
08 8948 1051  
[www.mentalhealthcarersnt.org](http://www.mentalhealthcarersnt.org)  
Schizophrenia Fellowship of NSW Inc  
02 9879 2600 [www.sfnsw.org.au](http://www.sfnsw.org.au)

Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria  
03 8486 4200 [www.mifellowship.org](http://www.mifellowship.org)  
Mental Illness Fellowship Nth Qld Inc  
07 4725 3664 [www.mifnq.org.au](http://www.mifnq.org.au)  
ARAFMI (Tas) Inc  
03 6331 4486

Schizophrenia Fellowship of Qld Inc  
07 3358 4424 [www.sfq.org.au](http://www.sfq.org.au)  
Mental Illness Fellowship of WA Inc  
08 9228 0200 [www.mifwa.org.au](http://www.mifwa.org.au)  
Mental Illness Fellowship of the ACT Inc  
02 6205 2021 [www.mifact.org.au](http://www.mifact.org.au)