



Successful change takes time

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Evansville Courier and Press
November 28, 2011

How many times have you sworn off bad habits or tried to develop new ones into your life? You plan to start your diet on Monday or to quit smoking when you finish your last pack.

Despite your best intentions you are unable to stay the course and nothing really changes. You wind up feeling disappointed and powerless to change. Perhaps you have never realized that successful change does not happen overnight and wanting to change is just one step in the process.

Behavioral change experts Dr. James Prochaska and Dr. Carlo DiClemente first developed the concept that change is a process that takes place over time, not a single event. During this process, various levels or stages of change occur.

In the Prochaska and DiClemente model the individual moves through six distinct stages that may take months or even years to complete. When motivational readiness exists, problematic behaviors can be eliminated and healthy habits can be developed. The Stages of Change Model provides a framework for understanding the process and recognizing the need for different interventions at each stage.

Avoidance, denial, and rationalization characterize the first stage, Pre-Contemplation. At this point, the individual is not vested in changing. For example, your doctor may advise you to quit smoking but you do not want to stop. You must be willing to explore how the behavior is working for you. Only through self exploration and re-evaluation of current

behaviors can one move to the next stage.

A serious assessment of the current behavior will lead to Contemplation, the second stage. Although ambivalence remains prevalent, weighing of the pros and cons takes place. For example, does the financial burden of smoking outweigh the enjoyment you get from cigarettes? If the behavior is too costly to continue, Preparation, the third stage, begins to take place.

At this point, one begins to “test the waters.” A plan for action within the next month is developed. For example, in preparing to stop smoking, a quit date should be decided upon. Initial steps should be small and a support system should be put in place. In the fourth stage, Action, the new behavior is practiced. For the next three to six month, feelings of loss might be experienced and it will be important to reiterate the long term benefits of changing the behavior.

When a continued commitment to the new behavior has been established, the fifth stage, Maintenance, has been reached. Developing a relapse plan that reinforces the commitment will assist in sustaining the new behavior over time.

The attainment of self efficacy with the new behavior or the termination of the old one defines success. In the event of Relapse, stage six, evaluation of triggers and development of stronger coping strategies might be necessary to get back on track. Maintaining change over time provides a formidable challenge.

Prochaska explains, “The number one reason why people relapse into old behaviors is emotional stress.”

Take your time in developing a plan. Most importantly, know where you are in the process so you can put the appropriate supports in place and know that change is possible!