

Module 12 Lesson 1

Transcript

I'm super excited to talk about behavior change with all of you today. This is a favorite topic of mine from back in the day when I took nutrition counseling in grad school, and I learned so much that I still use today. In this lesson, I'm going to teach you about the transtheoretical model of change, sometimes called the stages of change model, so that you'll be able to identify where your clients are in their readiness to change their behaviors based on what you learn today. I'll give you examples of what to look for when determining readiness to change, and share a worksheet attached here to help you determine where your client is in their readiness to make changes.

Okay, so let's begin by acknowledging this. Change is hard. I'm one of the weirdos who actually likes change a lot, but I know most people don't like it. It makes most people very uncomfy. It is uncomfortable for most people and awkward, and it can flat out stink sometimes. You can sugarcoat it, you can disguise it, or you can suffer through it, but no matter how you slice it, making a decision to do something in a new way is most often going to cause some discomfort. It's not like there are a bazillion reasons why we drink too much coffee or bite our nails or overdo it with ice cream. Habit and comfort are the top reasons why we do what we do or eat what we eat, and who wants to give up something they're familiar with and that makes them feel good?

This is where honing the craft of counseling is just so super important. If we want our clients to change their behaviors, we need to start with just how ready they are to do just that. I know I say it all the time, but think about it. Why do we have so many clients who come to us with a ton of nutrition and wellness knowledge who still don't apply it? Why do our clients who read diet books like trashy novels eat sugar cereals for breakfast? Forget the hormones and the other reasons that factor in for a second. Knowledge does not necessarily need action. Let's say that again. Knowledge does not necessarily mean action.

The gurus of behavior change are social scientists from the 1980s, Prochaska and DiClemente. Let's take a look at their theory on change. In the most elementary of stages, you may have someone who is just starting to consider making a behavior change, and this is called pre-contemplation. In the pre-contemplation stage, your client may come to you having noticed that she's put on weight. Her clothing isn't fitting, and maybe even her doctor or a friend have mentioned that she should lose a few pounds. The pre-contemplation client is going to present to you and say something like, "I'm here because my doctor says I need to lose some weight," or, "I notice I'm heavier, but I don't know if I want to give up my french fries."

In the pre-contemplation stage, your client may not see the benefits of losing weight yet. Some of my favorite clients have fallen into this category, because it feels so good when they're eventually successful. I had a student named Ellen come to me because her doctor wanted her to lose 10 pounds. She was a high achieving person, she was at Columbia, had great self esteem, and was truly so accomplished. She told me she didn't really think it was that important to lose 10 pounds, but came to me anyway because she wanted to be a good patient for her doctor. She was a pre-contemplator who didn't even consider her weight to be a problem or an issue. Lots of pre-contemplators are just like this.

In the next phase, which is contemplation, your clients see that there's a problem. Your client may see that her clothing is tight and it feels a little uncomfortable with a little extra weight. She's going to say things to you like, "My jeans are tight and I just bought a dress a size up from usual. I'm thinking about losing some weight. What do you think?", or maybe she's saying, "I know I can't afford to be overweight. My parents both have diabetes."

In the next phase, the preparation phase, she may seek out some information and come to you thinking about what she needs to do to lose the weight before she even steps into your office. She's gathering intel, and she may be chatting about it with others. She may just be gathering info that she does nothing with, or she may take that knowledge to the next phase, which is the action phase.

In the action phase, you guessed it, your clients are doing the work. It's glorious. It's amazing. It's beautiful. This is one of the most fun times to work with clients. You'll see beautiful food journals. You'll get emails with clarification about what a serving size of oats is, and followup emails asking if an avocado is a vegetable or a fat. In the action phase, your clients will say things like, "I'm setting a goal of getting greens in every single day at lunch this week," and, "I knew I was going to be in the car for hours and get hungry, so I packed two clementines and a mini container of almonds." They're excited, they're happy, they're doing the work.

Before I go on to the next phase, I want to mention that while you can never go back to pre-contemplation, where ignorance is bliss, you can jump around in your readiness to change and go from being in the action phase back to the contemplation phase, for example. Sometimes I have amazing clients doing incredible work, and then they drop off the face of the earth. I'm sure you've had that happen if you work with clients. Then when they finally come back, they've returned to their old ways. This does not mean failure, and you definitely need to reiterate this to your clients if you've seen this happen or you see this happen now. This is totally a normal part of human behavior. No guilt to be had here, no upset, just getting back on track like a stock. I use this example

a lot. It doesn't stay straight going up or down, it goes up and down, and it can be a successful investment even if it went down a little bit. You don't always have to move in the forward direction to be moving and making progress. Setbacks are part of the journey. It's another thing I always talk to clients about, that when they have a setback, it's all part of the big journey that they are on, and as long as they learn from it, it's good. It's part of the whole process.

Okay. The next phase of behavior change after action is maintenance. It's just what it sounds like. Your client gets so good at the action phase that it becomes second nature. It's just part of their life. People in the maintenance phase have met their goals and continue to flourish. They make statements like, "I usually switch between the yogurt and the eggs for breakfast. They're really working for me," and, "I look forward to Sundays. I shop and I meal prep with my partner. We're really having fun doing it." Sometimes clients on maintenance really need your support or the accountability of stepping on your scale to stick with their goal.

Finally, the last stage is termination. With the client in this phase, they're so grounded and happy in their new behaviors that they aren't missing their old behaviors at all. In fact, they may say something like, "I used to love a good burger. I ordered one yesterday from my favorite place, and it didn't even taste good to me anymore. I ate a few bites, but I didn't even want to finish it." Clients in termination identified their new behaviors as who they are and feel great about the behavior changes they have made. It's great to have a client meet their goal and terminate. They won't need you anymore, but you've helped them change their lives. I do have to say though, I always tell clients, even in this phase, that I am their health guru for life, and they can always use me as a resource, and yearly checkups are always a good thing, even for people in this phase.

Okay, so there you have it. That's the model. You may be saying, "So what? How do I use this when I'm working with my clients?" I'm going to stick with the weight loss example as I continue here, and hope you really use this next part of the lesson. You can swap weight loss for exercise goals or really any behavior you want to help your client change. First of all, when you're working with clients, I avoid the word change at all costs. People here change and they resist. Remember that uncomfortable talk we had at the beginning of this lesson about change? People get uncomfy with that word. I try really hard to focus on what to do rather than what my clients are giving up or, well, changing.

If Ellen, my example from earlier, wanted to lose weight, I wouldn't say, "Let's change your lunchtime burrito for a salad," but I might say, "Let's add in some extra vegetables at lunch. See if you can get more of those in and make that the priority." My hope is that if I can load Ellen up on

the veggies, she'll naturally eat less of the burrito. That's a pretty simple example, but I think you get it.

The second main point before I get to how you're going to counsel clients in each stage is that you need to figure out the motivation of each and every client you work with. Some clients want to lose weight because they want to look or feel better. Others want to lose weight because they're afraid of a heart attack or other medical problems. Many clients may want to lose weight to model healthy behaviors for their children. Really, the motivation is intimate to each client, and you need to hold that sacred.

You're going to have your own reasons for wanting your clients to lose weight. For example, maybe you think your client needs to lower her blood pressure, but your reasons will not help your client. If you're concerned that your client is modeling eating fast food every night for her kids, and your client thinks her kids are fine, but she wants to look like a supermodel, use the supermodel as the motivation in your counseling work.

Let's go back to the stages of change model. When you've identified that your client is in the pre-contemplation stage, your job is to increase their understanding of the risks or problems with their behaviors. Ellen may benefit from hearing about why being 10 pounds overweight is a problem. If you understand what motivates her, you can speak to her motivation. Ellen happened to be motivated by vanity. She thought she looked beautiful and voluptuous in her twenties, which was part of her culture. If I spoke to her about diabetes or heart disease or joint pain as she aged, she probably would not have cared at all.

I actually spent most of our first session talking about people she admired and how she could feel even sexier and more attractive and feel good in her body. I was able to get her to think more about being fit and more comfortable naked, which she was concerned about. She felt sexy in her heels and makeup, and not a superstar fresh out of the shower. I spoke to her goals and kept them in the forefront of our conversation. She barely knew about my health and wellness goals for her about her health, but it didn't matter, because our work together covered them both.

If you've identified that your client is in the contemplation phase, you're going to want to counsel your client a little deeper about the benefits to making a change and the risks not making those changes. Keep in mind again, don't use the word change. You want to paint the picture of them seeing themselves successfully doing the behaviors you're suggesting. This can be really detail-oriented if you want. Can you see yourself going to the Chipotle you always go to and getting the salad bowl instead of the burrito with double cheese? How challenging would it be to swap the daily bagel for breakfast with some yogurt and fruit and some nuts?

When you have a contemplator, use their motivation when you're painting the picture. Have them put a pair of pants they want to fit into again in the front of their closet. Have them put up a favorite photo of themselves as their screensaver or maybe even on the refrigerator, as old school as it sounds. Small tips like this can push people into action in this phase, and when they're in the action phase, here's where your plan really comes in. In the action phase, if you really get your client, they will feel understood. You'll be able to justify every breakfast or snack suggestion you make. You'll have respected that they need to get their workout in the morning and plan their water drinking heavier after 2:00 PM. You understand them, you've done your intake, you get them, and they're putting your tips into action. Your plan should honor your client's lifestyle and motivation, and here you'll offer a lot of support and accountability to help them move into the maintenance phase.

When you identify that a client is a maintainer, maybe she's kept a food journal for years, hasn't budged over size eight, and the scale has been consistent as her spin classes, you may still be a really important tool in her success, though. They should use you as their health resource and for a regular health checkup, kind of like what I was saying with that yearly checkup, or sometimes in this phase, it may even be once a month. I've had clients in maintenance say they only maintain because they know they have to step on my scale on the first Monday of every month. Others know they have to keep a journal to stay on board. They know it, they're doing it. It's part of what they're used to at this point. It's not uncommon to have a client in maintenance who never stops missing their favorite indulgences either, so they need me to help them plan for them and not feel guilty over it, but enjoy those conscious indulgences. Others get great at doing that on their own, and even your clients who have terminated may still like to know that you're out there.

This is why I recommend, again, those annual checkups, and at minimum, an annual email or card is so nice too. You can stay connected to your clients, and you can even get new feedback. You can stay connected to your clients, they may refer a new client, and you get great feedback on how they're doing.

Okay, this was a long one, but I hope you enjoyed it. Let's take a quick moment to review the key points. The stages of change are pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance and termination. Avoid the word change with your clients as much as possible. Focus on what to do rather than what clients are giving up. Figure out the motivation of each and every client you work with and speak directly to their motivations in the work you do. Clients can never go back to pre-contemplation, but they can jump around in their readiness to change and go back to different phases throughout your work together. When clients have reached termination, I still

recommend an annual checkup, and at minimum, an email or a handwritten note. I will see you in the next lesson.