

“Understanding and Facilitating Personal Change”

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Introduction

Many times people reach a point in their lives where they experience a desire to make a personal change, but do not know how to actually do it. I may wish to eat in a way that is more healthy and environmentally gentler, have a different relationship with paid employment, save money to achieve an important life goal, or behave in a manner that is less angry, defensive, and reactive. I want to see change happen in myself, but I don't know how to bring it about.

Sometimes, as educators or friends or activists, we wish to help *other* people change but are frustrated in our efforts. If we understand the process of belief and behavior change we can be more successful in these areas. If we understand what facilitates change and what blocks it, we can become skilled at producing lasting and beneficial change.

Personal change typically takes place in stages, and the following 6 stage model is helpful in understanding how change takes place. The description that follows was influenced by the work of psychologist James Prochaska, but is to a large degree based on my observations of the change process in working with students and others (including myself!) over the years. The six stages that seem to operate are No Awareness, Awareness, Active Consideration, Belief Decision, Action Commitment, and Consolidation. Let us examine these stages in some depth.

I. No Awareness

While in the first stage of No Awareness (also called Pre-Awareness), an individual has a total lack of awareness that there is an issue or a choice. There is no awareness that there is anything to think about or a choice to be made. The person simply automatically continues doing what they've always done. There is no other way. Eating meat is a good example. A person has always eaten meat, everyone they know eats meat, the only thing to think about is what kind of meat to have as the main course of each meal.

Working 40 or more hours a week at paid employment is also a good example: I operate on the unconscious assumption that having one's life revolve around paid employment is just the way the world is: you pick some job to be your career, you prepare yourself to do it, then you work at it 40 or more hours a week, week after week, year after year, until you reach something called “retirement age.” You need to think, of course, about which job you choose as a career, but it's simply assumed that of course your life will be dominated by paid employment and your other interests will get the left over scraps of your time and energy.

Our beliefs at this point are typically unconscious, but none the less they are very powerful determinants of our choices and behaviors.