

How to Make Lasting Changes



Kristi Weaver, LCPC

As January 1, 2022 rolled around, gym memberships around the world began to vastly increase, as has typically been observed with the start of each new year. For the first few weeks of January, these places will be filled with enthusiastic people who have resolved to be healthier in the new year. We've been heavily exposed to the concept of "new year, new you," across various media outlets who encourage people to use the symbolism of a new year as a time to wipe the slate clean so to speak – to start over, and to be better in various areas of our lives. Many people embrace this idea, thus the heavy gym traffic the first two weeks of January. By January 15, we'll see a significant decrease in the number people actively using their memberships. So what happens? How can a person be so firmly resolved on January 1, and yet have given up within the first two weeks? A study conducted at Scranton University found that only 19% of people actually keep their new year's resolutions. As a psychotherapist, I'm not surprised by this finding. The problem lies in identifying a specific date that one will begin to implement changes rather than implementing changes when one is truly ready. According to the transtheoretical model of change, one must pass through five basic stages before creating meaningful and lasting changes. (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1984) First, an individual will be in a 1) **pre-contemplative stage** where they have no specific intention to make any changes to current habits and behaviors. In this stage, people are still unaware that their behaviors are problematic. However, once they begin to experience more significant repercussions for maladaptive behaviors, they may then enter a 2) **contemplative stage** where they look more carefully at their issues and consider making changes. Once an individual has determined that he will benefit in positive ways from change, he will then make 3) **preparations** to change. In the 4) **action stage**, one is actively working on the changes, and making necessary adjustments as the process unfolds. As success is achieved, one enters a 5) **maintenance stage** in which they are actively, regularly implementing their new, healthier habits/behaviors. The reason most new year's resolutions fail is simply because people are using a calendar date to start making changes, rather than beginning changes when they are truly ready and truly resolved to do better. It is therefore recommended that one start implementing healthier habits when one is truly ready to commit.

5 basic stages of creating meaningful and lasting changes.

- 1) **Pre-Contemplative Stage** where they have no specific intention to make any changes to current habits and behaviors. In this stage, people are still unaware that their behaviors are problematic.
- 2) **Contemplative Stage** where they look more carefully at their issues and consider making changes. Once an individual has determined that he will benefit in positive ways from change, he will then make plan to change.
- 3) **Prepare** to change.
- 4) **Action Stage**, one is actively working on the changes, and making necessary adjustments as the process unfolds.
- 5) **Maintenance Stage** in which they are actively, regularly implementing their new, healthier habits/behaviors

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please call (618)357-8811.

Once you are clearly determined to make lasting changes, I recommend using the **SMART** goal setting method to clarify what you will do, why you will do it, when you will do it, and how you will do it. **SMART** goals were created by George M. Doran in 1981. Doran contemplated the writings of Elbert Hubbard, a 19th century renowned American philosopher who suggested that people fail at their endeavors not because of lack of intelligence, diligence or willpower, but because they did not know how to effectively organize their energies around a goal, and had no framework for the implementation of their goals. Doran provides this framework with **SMART** goals. He asserts that goals must be **S**—Specific, **M**—Measurable, **A**—Achievable, **R**—Realistic, and **T**—Time-bound. So, as you find yourself contemplating making lasting changes, consider using this model to identify and clearly define that which you wish to improve; quantify indicators of progress; make sure you're being realistic by examining your strengths and weaknesses; and make sure you're giving yourself a deadline. Walt Disney tells us "Everything needs a deadline." Why? Because we tend to work "with more fury" if we've defined a date by which we will achieve our goals. Without a deadline, it may be easy to begin to backslide or to give up on a goal altogether.

SMART Goals

S - Specific

M - Measurable

A - Achievable

R - Realistic

T - Time-bound

When you're truly resolved to make changes and have clearly identified your goals, Harvard Health Publishing suggests the following steps that will lead to lasting changes. First, dream big! The more audacious your goals are, the more compelling they are. 2) Break those big dreams into smaller steps. As an avid hiker, I intend to hike the Appalachian Trail in its entirety during this decade of my life. However, work and other life obligations do not allow me to do this all at once. I know I will have to break this down into smaller section hikes in order to achieve my goal. Similarly, with a deadline in mind, consider breaking your goals down into smaller, doable tasks that will leave you feeling satisfied with your continued progress. 3) Understand why you shouldn't make changes. Yes, you read that correctly. It's important to understand why you've been hanging on to old habits and routines. Many unhealthy habits like overeating or substance use have immediate pleasurable payoffs. This is why you haven't been changing maladaptive behaviors. Instead of continuing those behaviors in their entirety, consider engaging in some enjoyable aspects of the unhealthy behavior. So, for example if you like to go for a Saturday drive in the country, but then typically end up at Dairy Queen for a banana split, continue with the Saturday drive, but minus the banana split. It is important to fully commit yourself to change. 4) Make yourself accountable, and perhaps have a friend help with the accountability piece. For example, if your goal is to lose weight, weighing in in front of a trusted friend weekly can serve to motivate you to stay on track. And, if you should happen to have an off week, that friend can then help you identify what went wrong and what can be done to have greater success moving forward. 5) It's also important to reward yourself for a job well done. As kids, we get plenty of accolades from parents, teachers, coaches, and other mentors, but in adulthood, we sometimes find that not many people are passing out "atta-boy" or "atta-girl" awards to us anymore. Seek a pat on the back from someone you admire. Ask family and friends to cheer you on. Keep things as positive as possible, but 6) remember your past and learn from it. Any failed attempts you may have made previously can be chalked up to lessons learned. When inventing the lightbulb, for example, Thomas Edison concluded, "I didn't fail 1,000 times, I found 1,000 ways that wouldn't work." If you've ever visited the Ft. Myers, Florida area, you know that Thomas Edison and Henry Ford were neighbors and great friends. I'll leave you with this quote from Ford, which pretty much sums up the attitude one should adopt if desiring change. "Whether you think you can, or think you can't – you're right!"