

The Transtheoretical Model

The Transtheoretical Model (TTM; Prochaska & DiClemente, 1983; Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992) is an integrative, biopsychosocial model to conceptualize the process of intentional behavioral change. Whereas other models of behavioral change focus exclusively on certain dimensions of change (e.g. theories focusing mainly on social or biological influences), the TTM seeks to include and integrate key constructs from other theories into a comprehensive theory of change that can be applied to a variety of behaviors, populations, and settings (e.g. treatment settings, prevention and policy-making settings, etc.).

One of the key constructs of the TTM is the Stages of Change. Behavioral change can be thought of as occurring as a progression through a series of stages. Previous research has measured a number of cognitive and behavioral markers that have been used to identify these stages. The Stages of Change are as follows:

Precontemplation: Individuals in the Precontemplation stage are not thinking about or intending to change a problem behavior (or initiate a healthy behavior) in the near future (usually quantified as the next six months). Precontemplators are usually not armed with the facts about the risks associated with their behavior. Additionally, many individuals make unsuccessful change attempts, becoming discouraged and regressing back to the Precontemplation stage. The inclusion of the Precontemplation stage represents a significant contribution of the TTM, as individuals in this stage comprise a large proportion of individuals engaged in risky or unhealthy behaviors. In comparison to many traditional, action-oriented theories of behavior change, which view individuals in this stage as resistant and unmotivated, the TTM can be useful in guiding treatment and prevention programs by meeting the needs of these individuals, rather than ignoring them.

Contemplation: An individual enters the Contemplation stage when he or she becomes aware of a desire to change a particular behavior (typically defined as within the next six months). In this stage, individuals weigh the pros and cons of changing their behavior. Contemplators also represent a large proportion of individuals engaged in unhealthy behaviors, as ambivalence between the pros and cons of change keeps many people immobilized in this stage. Resolving this ambivalence is one way to help Contemplators progress toward taking action to change their behavior.

Preparation: By the time individuals enter the Preparation stage, the pros in favor of attempting to change a problem behavior outweigh the cons, and action is intended in the near future, typically measured as within the next thirty days. Many individuals in this stage have made an attempt to change their behavior in the past year, but have been unsuccessful in maintaining that change. Preparers often have a plan of action, but may not be entirely committed to their plan. Many traditional action-oriented behavior change programs are appropriate for individuals in this stage.

Action: The Action stage marks the beginning of actual change in the criterion behavior, typically within the past six months. By this point, where many theories of behavior change begin, an individual is half way through the process of behavior change according to the

Transtheoretical Model. This is also the point where relapse, and subsequently regressing to an earlier stage, is most likely. If an individual has not sufficiently prepared for change, and committed to their chosen plan of action, relapse back to the problem behavior is likely.

Maintenance: Individuals are thought to be in the Maintenance stage when they have successfully attained and maintained behavior change for at least six months. While the risk for relapse is still present in this stage, it is less so, and as such individuals need to exert less effort in engaging in change processes.

The Stages of Change addresses a facet of behavior change ignored by many other theories, namely that change is a process that occurs over time. It should be noted here that while progression through the Stages of Change can occur in a linear fashion, a nonlinear progression is more common. Often, individuals recycle through the stages, or regress to earlier stages from later ones, rather than progress through the stages in a linear sequence. Change often comes at it's own pace – often quickly and in bursts, rather than a consistent rate. It is not unusual for someone to spend years in Precontemplation and then progress to Action in a matter of weeks or months.