

The Cycle of Change

Understanding the Cycle of Change: A Compassionate Guide to Personal Growth

Change is rarely a straight line. If you have ever tried to break an old habit, start a new routine, or make a major life transition, you probably know that it comes with twists, turns, starts, and stops.

In therapy, we often use a framework called **The Cycle of Change** (originally developed by researchers James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente). This model views change not as a single event, but as a five stage journey.

Understanding where you are in this cycle can take the pressure off. It helps us to meet you exactly where you are today, without judgment, shame, or forced expectations.

The 5 Stages of Change

Everyone moves through these stages at their own pace. You might skip ahead, loop back, or pause at a stage for a while. All of that is a completely normal part of growth.

1. Precontemplation



2. Contemplation



3. Preparation



4. Action



5. Maintenance

(Lapses can happen at any point)

1. Precontemplation ("Not Ready Yet")

At this stage, you might not see a need for change, or you might feel that changing is impossible. Others around you might be suggesting a shift, but to you, the pros of staying the same still outweigh the cons.

- **What it feels like:** "I don't really see a problem with how things are," or "I've tried before and failed, so why bother?" or "I don't know what change looks like."
- **How we work with this:** There is no pressure to change here. Instead, we gently explore your thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a safe, open space.

2. Contemplation ("Thinking About It")

This is the stage of ambivalence. You are starting to recognize that a change might be beneficial, but you are also keenly aware of what you might have to give up and/or do. You are weighing up the pros and cons.

- **What it feels like:** "I know I should probably make a change, but it feels incredibly hard/scary," or "Yes, but..."
- **How we work with this:** We explore the options together. We look at your hopes for the future alongside the comfort of the present, helping you find your own internal motivation and what feels authentic to you. We might explore long held beliefs that are holding you back, your expectations and those of others.

3. Preparation ("Getting Ready")

You have made the decision that change would be beneficial and you are starting to plan how to make it happen. This is a creative and hopeful stage where you gather resources and think about practical steps.

- **What it feels like:** "I'm going to start next week," or "I'm researching support groups/tools to help me, I'm considering my options. What hobbies/activities bring me enjoyment? what feels purposeful and meaningful to me?"
- **With this:** We collaborate to build a realistic, flexible plan. We focus on small, manageable steps that feel safe and achievable for you.

4. Action ("Making the Move")

This is where the plan is put into motion. You are actively modifying your behaviour, environment, or relationships. It takes a lot of energy and conscious effort to stay in this stage.

- **What it feels like:** "I am actively doing things differently now, even if it feels awkward, difficult or uncomfortable."
- **How we work with this:** We focus on celebrating your wins, problem solving hurdles as they arise, and adjusting the plan to keep it supportive and sustainable.

5. Maintenance ("Keeping It Going")

You have successfully sustained your new behaviour for a while (typically six months or more). The new way of being is starting to feel like a natural part of who you are, though it still requires some attention.

- **What it feels like:** "This is my new normal, and I feel good about it, but I still have to be mindful."
- **How we work with this:** We focus on preventing burnout, reinforcing your self-worth, and building strategies to navigate future triggers or stressors.

A Gentle Note on "Lapse" or "Relapse"

Many modern versions of this model include *Lapse* as a natural, expected part of the cycle rather than a *failure*. Stepping back into an old pattern is not a reset to zero, it is simply a moment of learning. If a lapse happens, we look at it with curiosity and compassion: *What was happening in that moment? What did you need that you didn't get?* We then use that knowledge to help you step back into whichever stage of the cycle feels right.

How This Fits into Our Work Together

Because my practice is entirely person centred, I do not use these stages to label or box you in.

Instead, this model is a tool for us to collaborate. If you are in *Contemplation*, I won't push you to take *Action*, that would feel overwhelming and invalidating. If you are stuck in *Preparation*, we'll use gentle enquiry to explore any blocks and focus on your needs.

Wherever you are in this cycle, today is exactly where you are supposed to be.