

## Episode 43 -

### The Healthy Living Stages of Change

When I was younger, I remember taking road trips with my parents. Sometimes we would go to visit my brother or sister. They were quite a bit older than I was. Sometimes we would visit other relatives. Sometimes we would tag along with my dad if he had a conference or something like that for work, and I really liked those trips because we got to stay in a hotel, which we didn't do that often, and I really liked it if the hotel had a swimming pool. One of the things that I liked to do when I was on these road trips was get the map out, and help plan the route, and tell my parents where to turn, where to go, which exit to take, even though they usually knew they were going anyway. They kind of just indulged me, but I learned about how the interstates, the even numbered interstates would run east, and [inaudible 00:00:47] north and south. The ones starting with four would go around the cities. Those starting with two would go partially around the cities, and the interstates that started with three would go into and out of the cities, so it was kind of cool for me to geek out on that a little bit.

Maybe that's part of the reason why I decided to go and be a pilot, but I specifically remember those things, and over time, I remember it getting a little bit easier because when Triple A came along, then the triptychs came, and those were little pamphlets that essentially have the map within a booklet, so you had each leg of the trip in a booklet form on a different page, so you didn't have to open up the huge map. Now, fast forward 20 or 30 years, and all I have to do is put in a destination in my phone, and one of the map applications will take me where you need to go. I just need to follow the blue dot, and even if I know where I'm going, sometimes I'll put the destination in anyway because it's smart enough to know if there's an accident, or if there's construction or something like that. The point in all that is that roadmaps are critical in reaching your destination. Hey, I'm Coach T, and this is Episode Number 43 of the TD Fitness Podcast, and in this episode, we're going to start your roadmap to healthy living.

Welcome to the TD Fitness Podcast, giving you ways to live a healthy lifestyle without giving up the things that make life worth living and now your host, certified health coach and personal trainer, Coach T.

In the health coaching profession, there are a number of different tools that we use to help others improve their health living behaviors, especially when it relates to nutrition and fitness. One of the key focus areas is on the mindset of the individual, and that's something that I really like. I like the behavioral aspect of it, the behavior change component, so one of the tools that I use is a behavior change model of sorts. It's called the trans-theoretical model of behavior change. That's a mouthful, but a shorter and easier way to comprehend that title is just to break it down as the stages of change model. The stages of change model is a well-established model introduced in the early 1980s, and it's been applied to a number of different health behaviors since it was created, and it essentially consists of five different stages or phases that every individual progresses through when making minor to major health related changes in their lives.

It can likely be applied to other types of changes outside of health behaviors as well, but we'll focus on the healthy living behaviors here. Why is this important? We all like checklists. Give me the exact steps I need to take, for example, in order to live healthier, in order to eat better, in order to exercise more, and that is exactly what I want to give you, but in order to

do that, it's important to understand the different phases of the journey. See, when you travel cross country, there are many different areas that you'll travel through, different types of terrain, different climates, different accents, different cultures, and it's important to know where you are in order to continue to move forward. The stages of change model tells you where you are, and therefore, it helps you determine what's required to continue to move forward. It starts with identifying your readiness for change. In fact, that's the entire point. I wouldn't prescribe a five day a week exercise program to someone who doesn't think exercise is important at all.

I wouldn't tell you to drink 100 ounces of water per day if you barely drink one glass per day now. You see, once we identify the stage that you're in, then we can take an individualized approach to incorporating and maintaining healthy habits. Those healthy habits that are required, so this is all founded and grounded and guided by the stages of change model. The stages of change model has five different stages, and each stage is characterized by a unique level of readiness to change, or readiness to engage in healthy behavior. The stages are pre contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance, and as we progress from pre contemplation onward, then our readiness and our willingness to change increases, but first, it's important to identify your current stage of change. There are a couple of things to remember with all of this. The first is that the goal with the stages of change model, the goal is to always move to the next level. That's it. Nothing more.

Your goal is simply to move from the level you're in to the next one, and the second thing to remember is that although the model is linear, we all know that real life progression is not. Sometimes we move forward, and then we move backward. We'll take two steps forward, one step back, one step forward, two steps back. We'll move back and forth on this path, so the goal is simply to have a greater sum of forward movement than movement in the opposite direction, because that means we're getting better. Let's dive into these five stages. The first, as I said, is pre contemplation. This is where you're not even thinking about changing. You're simply not ready. If I had to put dialogue to it, it would be the equivalent of saying, "I won't," or "I can't." Some of the characteristics of this stage, you're not even aware of the problem, or maybe you are aware, and you just don't feel like it can be solved, or maybe you just don't care. Typically, individuals in the pre contemplation stage are sedentary. They just simply don't see the benefits of exercise, or improving their diet.

Sometimes it helps, if you can't really see yourself in this, or any of these other stages, try to think about someone you know. Is there someone you've been encouraging to exercise more, or to eat healthier, and it seems like it just continues to fall on deaf ears. Perhaps they're in the pre contemplation stage, so the goal here is to increase awareness of the risks associated with inactivity, for example, and increase awareness of the benefits of activity. You want to focus on addressing something that is relevant to them. Have them start thinking about change. Just don't be too overbearing with it, because it can definitely take time. To move individuals in the pre contemplation stage to the next level, there are a number of things that you can do. You can encourage. You can express concern. You can help point out some of the advantages to change. Simply provide information, reaffirm that the decision, though, is ultimately theirs. They have to decide to move forward, and to move to the next stage. They can't be pulled along. It has to be an internal decision.

Remember to encourage exploration, not action, because again, we're simply trying to move them from pre contemplation to stage number two. Stage number two is contemplation, so here in the contemplation stage, they're weighing the pros and the cons of changing. This is the I might crowd, so maybe they don't know how to go about changing, but at least they're thinking about it. Some of the traits associated with the contemplation stage, they're aware of the problem and weighing the benefits versus the risks of change, for example, but they have very little understanding of how to actually go about changing, how to implement that

change. They may start to consider the importance of change. They may start to understand some of those risks associated with not changing, but they're still not quite ready to commit. The goal here is simply to make them aware of available options. You can provide certain cues to action, and some basic structured direction. Things that'll help encourage people to, encourage individuals in the contemplation stage to review the pros and the cons associated with making any kind of behavior change.

Think about the benefits as well as the obstacles, and then when the obstacles are identified, you want to help them determine how to overcome those barriers. Interest and thinking about change does not indicate a readiness to change. You're really not ready until you hit the next stage, and that is stage number three, the preparation stage. This is where you're saying, "I will," so you're getting ready to make a change by actively seeking out the opportunity to do so. Individuals in the preparation stage combine intent with behavior and activity, so some of the traits of the preparation stage, you're seeking an opportunity to participate in activity, or to improve your dietary practices. You're not sedentary, but activity and action may be somewhat sporadic. It's definitely not consistent. In this stage, you're preparing yourself for change. You're ready, though, to adopt a healthier lifestyle, and you're looking for some specifics on how to start, and on where to start.

Some of the goals with those in the preparation stage is to incorporate some kind of structured, regular programming that includes frequent positive feedback and other reinforcements, positive reinforcements on progress. Feedback and reinforcement are extremely important at this part of the process to, in order to build confidence and create positive experiences, because it's those positive experiences particularly early on that are going to help to build some of that momentum, and keep you going forward in the early stages of change. Stage number four is the action stage, and this is where you're practicing the new behavior. If the pre contemplation stage was the I won't or I can't phase, and then the contemplation stage was the I might stage, preparation was I will ... Stage is, I am, so you're looking for opportunities to maintain activity. Some of the traits here, you're changing your beliefs and your attitudes, and that is a definite bonus. That's a pro.

A con, however, of the action stage, is that you are at a higher risk for lapses and returns to undesirable behavior. The goal is to establish exercise, and/or healthy nutrition as habits that continue through motivation and continue through consistency. You're typically engaged in regular, healthy fitness or nutrition habits for six months or more in the action stage. Coaching is the most important in this stage, too. Health coaching is the most important here, and that's essentially why I created the Fit Life program, so when you think about pre contemplation, contemplation, and the preparation stages, those are the stages that are addressed at least through the services that I offer at TD Fitness, those are addressed through the blog and the podcast by providing you information, knowledge, and tools to help you move along. There is some kind of method to the madness here. I try to focus on each one of the stages with appropriate information or services for that stage.

Again, coaching is the most important in the action stage for a number of reasons, all of which are covered in the Fit Life program. Some of these include helping you to set smart goals. Those are the goals that are specific, that are measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound, smart. Providing encouragement, providing support, and focusing on the long-term advantages of healthy behaviors, and helping with some of those obstacles that you'll encounter. Also celebrating successes. That's going to be key, and continuing to provide information through either reference material or other types of material to help you continue to build your knowledge base as you move forward. Accountability is fundamentally key in this stage, particularly different types of accountability and check in, either from social support, from friends, or family, or from your coach through things like the app that we use with the Fit Life Program. Each of these things is vitally important.

One of the big things is that you are, in the action phase, you are better able to anticipate and overcome obstacles that can hurt your motivation and consistency. That is one of the keys with the action phase. Phase number five is the maintenance phase. This is where you have incorporated the new behavior into your lifestyle, so here you're saying, "I still am," or "I have," because you have a desire to maintain, and you are also more capable of dealing with those things that threaten your maintenance, so the risk is lower that you'd have a lapse or move backward. Although the risk is still there, it's not as high as when you first start in the action phase, so in the maintenance phase, you've been doing it for a period of time, typically consistent action for longer than six months. That's considered maintenance phase, but preventing ... As I said, preventing lapses from turning into a relapse is a key, because there's a difference. Lapses are just momentarily maybe a few days of off your diet plan, or away from exercise in the gym, but relapses are when you go completely back into your old habits, your old ways.

We want to prevent lapses from turning into relapses. Things that increase the chances of lapses and relapses are external stressors, such as moving, starting a new job, an injury, any kind of life changes. Those all increase the chances of a relapse, so the goal is to maintain those support systems, try to maintain interest, and avoid burnout. This is one of the reasons why we incorporate intentional breaks in the Fit Life program, because if you consistently try to accomplish those changed habits, day in and day out without any kind of break, any kind of reprieve, then you will burn out, so it's important to incorporate periods of rest, and periods where you don't have to focus on maintaining habits. You want to stay focused on risks of slipping back into your old ways in the maintenance phase, all right? Those are the five stages, the pre contemplation stage, the contemplation stage, preparation, action, and maintenance. A couple other things to note, so there's a concept called decisional balance that is also a part of all this.

That basically means that precontemplators and contemplators, those in stages one or two, perceive more cons than pros when they think about making healthy lifestyle changes or choices. For example, the pain associated with exercising due to soreness, inconvenience of maintaining a healthier diet, a lack of time, the cost. Those are all things that we tend to focus on in the pre contemplation and the contemplation stage, but as we progress through the stages, those pros tend to become more prevalent, so those in the action and maintenance stages have it easier in this regard, and that is one of the reasons why I say that small wins add up and tend to snowball, because things do get easier as you go along. Not saying they become completely easy, because there's still a level of effort that's required to maintain, but they're definitely easier as you go along than it is when you start. That's one of the reasons why the hardest part of making these healthy changes is simply starting.

Another thing to consider. You may be at different stages depending on the area or the focus area that we're talking about, so there are those that have their diet wired, but can't find time to exercise. Conversely, there are those who exercise consistently, and feel like they can and should be able to eat whatever they want, but obviously we need a healthy balance of fitness and nutrition. The point is that different types of change sometimes require different approaches because we're at different levels. The third thing I want to point out is that you can move up and down this ladder in different times, different situations, and different stages of life. Lapses can occur. Lapses are normal. Lapses will occur, I should say, but they're not the same as relapses. Remember, no one is perfect, right? Consistency over time is a better goal than perfection all the time. Let me remind you, when you look at your roadmap with the stages of change as a backdrop or as kind of a general guideline along that path, the goal, again, is simply to move to the next stage.

It doesn't have to be quickly. It doesn't have to be overnight, but you want forward progress, forward movement. Nothing more. You're not trying to jump steps. You just simply want to

move to the next stage, so now, I have a question for you. Think about some of your past attempts at living healthier, or attempting to make some type of change for the better. Think back and try to remember what stage of change you were in when you started that. It's likely that your success or lack of success, if you want to call it that, was related to the stage going in. To put it differently, it's more likely that your level of success was related to recognizing the stage you were in. If you worked with a fitness professional, then my hope is that he or she took this into consideration as well, but moving forward, we need to ask, what can I now do with this knowledge? How do you operationalize those stages of change? Okay, I may know that I'm a pre contemplator, or a contemplator, or preparation stage, or that I'm in the action or maintenance stage, but how do I operationalize that?

How do I use that? We are going to talk about that in the next episode. That's where we get more into your path, and your roadmap for healthy living. I hope to see you there, but before that, just a quick reminder to head over to [tdfitness.com/043](http://tdfitness.com/043) for the show notes to this episode, and here's a quick word about the Fit Life Program. Have a blessed one. Coach T out. Why did I create the Fit Life Program? I wanted to provide something that wasn't just for weight loss, not just for feeling better, not even just for better health. I wanted a more complete solution, and I also wanted to make it sustainable. It's not just about starting something, or sticking with it for a month or two. Healthy living, which includes fitness, nutrition, and a healthy mindset, is about practicing healthy habits consistently. Not all the time, because no one is perfect, but practicing those healthy habits more than you are right now. That's how change begins, and that's how healthy living continues. Find out more at [fitlifeprogram.com](http://fitlifeprogram.com), or [tdfitness.net/fitlife](http://tdfitness.net/fitlife).