

**HOW TO GET SOMEONE TO CHANGE:  
A KEY TO WISDOM  
William Doverspike, Ph.D.  
Drdoverspike.com  
770-913-0506**

Why don't people change? Why don't people change what we want them to change? These are common questions faced by psychologists when prospective clients call and complain about someone else's behavior. There are often three reasons that people do not change:

- ☒ **Unmotivated:** Not convinced of the problem or the need for change
- ☒ **Unwilling:** Not committed to making a change
- ☒ **Unable:** Not able to change due to an actual or perceived inability or skill

Rather than asking *why* people don't change, a better question is this one: *What* is this person motivated to change *at this time*? A starting point involves examining *how* people change. Typically, for a person to change, three conditions must be present. The person must be ready, willing, and able.

**Readiness to change.** *Readiness* usually involves identification of the stage of change a person is in (Prochaska, 1994). For example, a person in the precontemplation stage, where "ignorance is bliss," may not even perceive a need to change. One of the biggest mistakes of novice counselors is to give advice or suggest change before the person is at an action stage or even a contemplation stage of change. Even when a person voices a desire to change, there is usually ambivalence and a reservoir of reactance against change.

Does nagging work? For over 40 years, psychologists have known that does nagging work—to create resistance to change. *Reactance* refers to a motivational reaction to rules, regulations, or requirements that threaten to eliminate specific behavioral freedom (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Reactance occurs when a person feels that someone or something will be limiting or taking away one's range of choices.

**Willingness to change.** *Willingness*, a term that some writers use synonymously with readiness, usually refers to a person's recognition that he or she is willing to feel the anxiety, difficulty, and discomfort that come with change. Willingness is a precursor—a prerequisite—of change. Without a will, there can be no way.

According to psychologist Fred Hanna (2002), when the precursor of willingness to change is present, anxiety or difficulty is not resisted but is directly experienced—in the knowledge that doing so is necessary for change to take place. The ability to tolerate anxiety and discomfort is another precursor of change. Defensiveness, which is an attempt to avoid anxiety, is the diametric opposite of willingness. A serious misconception held by inexperienced therapists is the belief that once a decision to change is made, the person will automatically move into action. Consider this question: Three frogs were on a lily pad and one decided to jump. How many frogs were left? The answer is three. *Deciding* to jump is not the same thing as jumping. Once a decision is made to jump, there are skills needed in order to learn *how* to jump. In other words, jumping requires abilities.

**Ability to change.** *Ability* usually refers to the range of cognitive and behavioral skills that are required to achieve various goals and objectives. SMART goals are usually Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound. *Objectives* are the steps taken on a daily or weekly basis that lead to goals, whereas *goals* are more long range and based on one's values. Most people overestimate what they can achieve in a short period of time, yet they underestimate what they can achieve over a long period of time. Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) gave good advice when he observed, "Go as far as you can see. When you get there, you will be able to see farther."

Psychologists use a variety of cognitive and behavioral skills with clients who are in the action stage of change. Basic behavioral building blocks include shaping, reinforcement, behavioral chaining, contingency management, stimulus control, Premack's principle, and many other tools. Constructive cognitive concepts include the use of analyzing, positive affirmations, reframing, decisional balancing, situational pinpointing, consequential thinking, thought-stopping, talking back to urges, talking back to negative thoughts, and many others. For example, the cognitive intervention of *reframing* involves simply seeing the positive side of a negative, such as "making lemonade out of lemons." The only difference between stumbling blocks and stepping stones is how we use them.<sup>1</sup> As another example of a cognitive technique, here is the *miracle question* (de Shazer, 1985, p. 5):

Suppose one night, while you are asleep, there is a miracle and the problem that brought you into therapy is solved. However, because you are asleep, you don't know that the miracle has already happened. When you wake up in the morning, what will be different that will tell you that this miracle has taken place?...What else?

**Change takes time.** Consider this horse training tip: In the words of the American horse trainer Monty Roberts (1997), "If you act like you only have a few minutes, it can take all day. If you act like you have all day, it may take only a few minutes." When working with humans, particularly during motivational interviewing when treating addictions, effective counselors usually remain less motivated than their clients when it comes to the client making a change. From a rather paradoxical perspective, it is the client—not the therapist—who must make the arguments for change (Miller & Rollnick, 2002).

As Gerard Connors and colleagues (2013) have observed, "For most clients, the individual therapist assists them in moving along the path to change without ever seeing the ultimate outcome of the process of change" (p. 122).

**Where does change begin?** The famous strategic psychotherapist Jay Haley (1973) once observed that most people who consult with psychotherapists do so *not* to change but rather to *keep* from changing. In other words, for most people who come to counseling, their unspoken expectation is that of getting someone *else* to change. A paradigm shift occurs when clients realize that *they* are the ones who must change.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) once said, "Everybody thinks of changing the world, and nobody thinks of changing himself."<sup>2</sup> This observation was made centuries earlier by an Anglo-Saxon Bishop (1100 A.D.) whose words were written on his tomb in the crypts of Westminster Abbey:

When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamed of changing the world. As I grew older and wiser, I discovered the world would not change, so I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But it too seemed immovable. As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing only my family, those closest to me, but alas, they would have none of it. And now as I lie on my deathbed, I suddenly realize: If I had only changed myself first, then by example I would have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would have then been able to better my country and, who knows, I may have even changed the world.

The wisdom from the crypts of Westminster Abbey is expressed in a more succinct form by the words of the Serenity Prayer, usually attributed to the 20th century theologian Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971):

God,  
Grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change,  
courage  
to change the things I can,  
and wisdom  
to know the difference.

How do we get someone to change? One key to wisdom is knowing that we may need to be the one to change.

### Notes

1. This quotation is taken from, “Teachers who inspire realize there will always be rocks in the road ahead of us. They will be stumbling blocks or stepping stones; it all depends on how we use them.”  
Author Unknown
2. According to one source, Leo Tolstoy once said, “Everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself.” In Mead, Frank S. (Ed.) (1965). *Encyclopedia of religious quotations*. London: Peter Davis Ltd., p. 400.

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