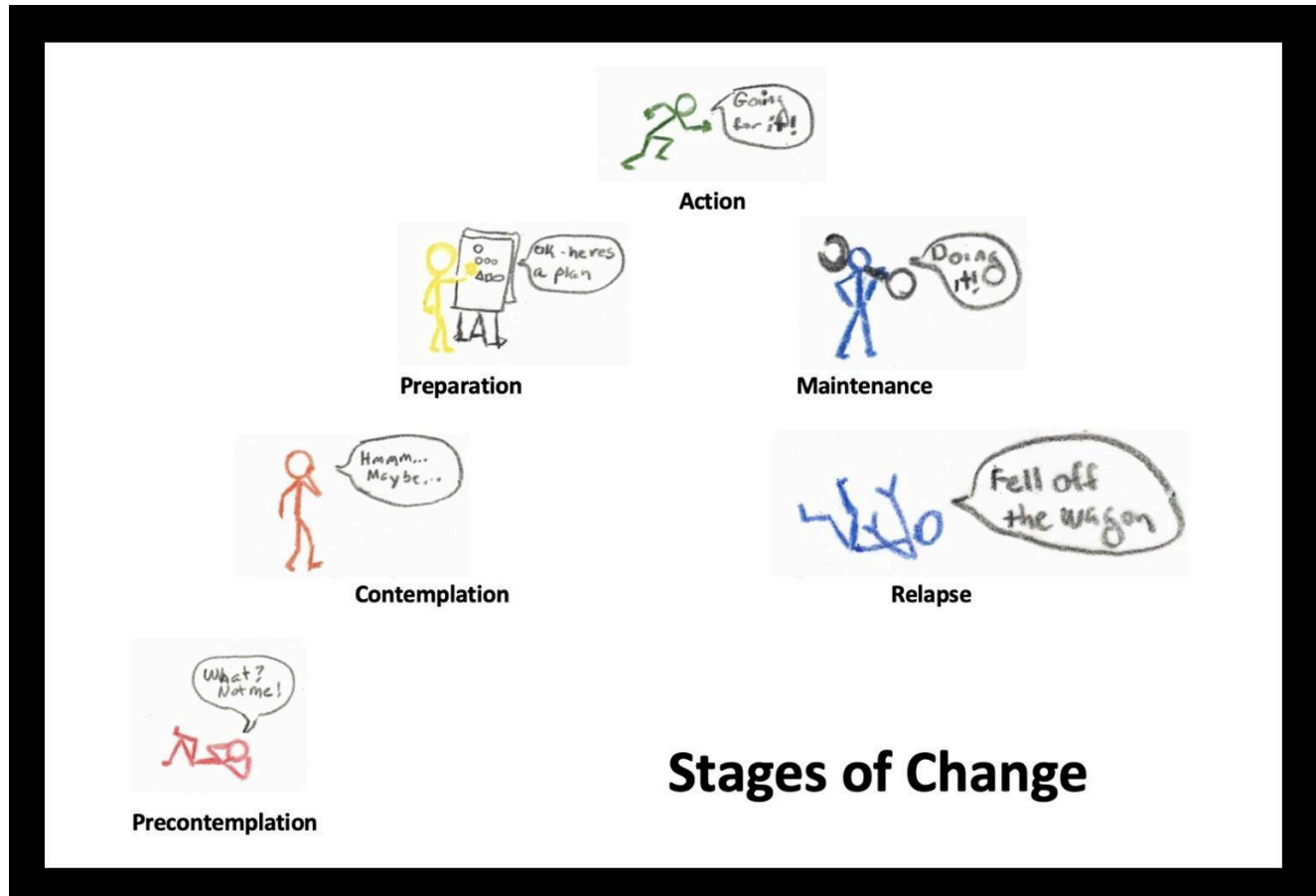


Stages of Change in Action*



Regina Sewell

Phd, LMHC, PCC, PAT

Hudson Valley Psychodrama Institute and SUNY New Paltz

Change is a process. In order to help clients make the life changes they need to make, we need to be able to assess where they are at in terms of this process and help them find the tools they need to make these changes permanent. Talking to clients and/or having them fill out a questionnaire about their perceptions about change can be helpful, but these approaches only scratch the surface. They ignore the disconnect between the head and the heart.

Developed by J.L. Moreno, Psychodrama, Sociodrama and Sociometry are particularly useful methods for working with change because they bring in the body as well as the mind. In doing so, they cut through rationalization, denial, justification and various other defenses that people use to avoid change. Sociometric tools such as spectrograms and locograms provide a way for clients to not just think about where they are in the change process, but to feel where they are in the process in their bodies. And because these techniques get clients out of their seats, they provide an easy way to get group members talking with each other about their relationship to change. Psychodrama, Sociodrama and Sociometry also provide a wholistic set of tools that help clients resolve their ambivalence about

change and develop more healthy tools to cope with life.

Psychodramatic techniques help people in the precontemplation stage gain awareness of the problem. Using psychodrama, we can invite clients to step into the shoes of someone they love and experience how their current or past behavior impacts this person so that they can feel the impact of their behavior at the body level. This often helps clients find the internal impetus to change.

Clients in the contemplation stage benefit from psychodramatic techniques that allow them to explore their ambivalence in action. For example, by giving clients a chance to give voice to the pull to change and to the pull to not change, the Angel/Devil techniques keeps clients from glossing over the struggle of ambivalence and helps them take the next step to prepare making changes. Coleman's Angle of Opportunity allows clients to explore what the future might be like if they continue on the path they are on and compare it to what the future might be like if they change their behavior. Coleman's Angle of Opportunity also helps instill hope by helping them begin to imagine that change is possible.

Clients in preparation stage have begun "testing the waters" by taking little steps towards changing their behavior but these steps have not resulted in significant results. The Future Projection technique is useful in this stage because it gives people a chance to experience what their lives might be like after they have made the change. By stepping into the future, people are able to identify the steps they took to successfully make the change. In the process, clients are able to create plan to accomplish their goals. The act of creating plans makes hope more tangible.

Clients in action stage are often in need of reinforcement and support in the face of People, Places and Things that are likely to pull them back into old behaviors. The Social Atom allows clients to map out their social world and see who is supportive of their change and who in their social world is less supportive and/or likely to disrupt their efforts to change. They can use this information to decide which relationships to nurture and which relationships to pull back from.

Role Training gives clients a chance to practice dealing effectively with challenging situations that threaten to drag them back to their old behaviors. This is helpful for clients in the maintenance and relapse prevention stage and helps make the changes clients have made sustainable in the long run.

Psychodramatic techniques are even useful in the unofficial sixth stage – relapse. Timelines give clients who have fallen off the wagon a chance to explore in action the thoughts, behaviors and experiences that led them to relapse. This enables clients to learn from their mistakes, have compassion for themselves and find the drive to change again.

*Based on: Prochaska, J. O., & Norcross, J. C. (2002). Stages of Change. In J. C. Norcross (Ed.), *Psychotherapy relationships that work: Therapist contributions and responsiveness to patients* (pp. 303–313). Oxford University Press.

*Original Artwork by Regina Sewell