

YOUR COMPLIMENTARY ROADMAP

STEPS TO RECOVERY

Breaking The Cycle



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction
2. Christine's Cycle
3. Anthony's Journey
4. Conclusion

INTRODUCTION

Research was done as far back as 1977 on the process of how a person can change and maintain a changed behavior by James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente. Their model was initially created for smoking cessation. The change interventions have been used for stress management, adherence to taking antihypertensive and lipid-lowering medications, depression prevention, and weight management. The change model is now applied to substance use disorder recovery and is versatile enough to be used with many other behavioral changes.

My emphasis in this book will be on the process of reducing and hopefully stopping alcohol consumption and drugs of abuse and their negative consequences. This is a timely topic to explore since on January 3, 2025 the **U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy Issued a New Advisory on the Link Between Alcohol and Cancer Risk.**

He stated that Alcohol Consumption is the Third Leading Preventable Cause of Cancer in the United States

“Alcohol is a well-established, preventable cause of cancer responsible for about 100,000 cases of cancer and 20,000 cancer deaths annually in the United States – greater than the 13,500 alcohol-associated traffic crash fatalities per

year in the U.S. – yet the majority of Americans are unaware of this risk. This Advisory lays out steps we can all take to increase awareness of alcohol’s cancer risk and minimize harm.” The full report can be found on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services web site.

The stages of change are divided into 6 fluid steps

1. **Precontemplation** is the starting point. Common thoughts in this stage might include – “I don’t have a problem.” “I can quit anytime I want.” People in this stage underestimate the pros of changing and diminish the cons of drinking as usual. Treatment providers will assess that person as either being in denial about the consequences of the alcohol use disorder or they’re not ready to change yet. People in this stage of change are encouraged to be mindful of their drinking and the benefits of change by cutting down or stopping altogether.
2. **Contemplation** is the second stage of change. Awareness of the negative consequences of drinking or drugging and the benefits of cutting down or stopping is surfacing. In this stage the drinker or drug user can admit that a change is needed. This admission may not come until there is a medical consequence to the drinking, a DUI, the job is in jeopardy, intimate relationship upheaval, and

countless others. The number 1 con for brothers to seek treatment is threatens of job loss.

Situations that lead women to seek treatment for a substance use disorder is more complicated from social and family issues, for instance DCFS is threatening to take their children or have taken them already, and health problems such as hypertension, diabetes, a cancer diagnosis, to specifics like: death of loved ones, violence from partners, theft, cognitive problems (“I went out drinking or drugging and can’t find my car”.)

3. **Preparation** is stage 3. The intention to change and the commitment to execute a plan in the next 30 days is made. The better the plan, like calling the insurance provider, reaching out to the employment assistance program at work, making an appointment with the primary care provider, and investigating treatment centers, the better the outcome.
4. **Action** is stage 4. The plans made in the preparation stage are implemented and revised as needed. Enrolling in an inpatient or outpatient rehabilitation center may be needed. This is where avoiding people who trigger or encourage the alcohol or drug use, staying away from places where the drinking or drug use was happening, and getting rid of things that led

to drinking or drug use. That thing might be a toxic relationship.

5. **Maintenance** is the last stage of change. There has been practice of the desired behavior for at least 6 months. The change to abstinence from drugs and alcohol use becomes a lifestyle. Engaging in outpatient rehabilitation for treatment of the substance use disorder and any mental health problems are encouraged and are helpful for continued success. Self-help meetings in your community, at church, or virtually may be helpful to stay in the maintenance stage of change.
6. If there is a **relapse** back to drinking or using drugs, starting over in any stage at any time is recommended.

A woman and a man were interviewed, and their recovery journeys will be applied to the Stages of Change. To assist with tracking the Stages of Change, this is the guide that will be used: (P) for precontemplation, (C) for contemplation, (Pr) preparation, (A) for action, (M) for maintenance, and (R) for relapse.

CHRISTINE'S CYCLE TO RECOVERY

Question: Christine, thank you for agreeing to this interview. Will you tell me about your precontemplation stage before deciding to go into drug treatment?

Answer: (P) When I was 15 or 16 years old, I overdosed on purpose to kill myself. I was dead to the world, and my family took me to the hospital. They all showed up at the hospital along with the police. The police wanted to know who I got the drugs from. After I got out of the hospital, I had to go to the police station. I told them I just wanted to get high and that I was not suicidal. I just drank a Pepsi and passed out.

PCP was a big drug, I like it, and while under the influence, I had no idea of what I was doing and had no recollection of what I had done. I was angry with my older sister, Lyn, for meddling in my life.

The next precontemplation was at age 18 when I was drinking alcohol and doing PCP. My father was abusive to my mother, and she would always have weapon on her. I was always in fear that he or she would kill each other. When the fighting got bad, I'd call Lyn, and she would pick me up and take me to her house. Through all the chaos at home, I thought I was living with coo-coos, but I did not have a problem with drugs or alcohol. My father was from Spain and went there for a visit and never returned home. He abandoned the family.

I was intrigued with a neighbor who had a black room and black lights where he used heroin, and I wanted what he had. I did not believe I had a problem even though I was drinking every day. By the age of 18 both my parents were dead and I continued to live in the apartment I shared with my mother. After Mom died, I painted a room

black and got a black light and created my own party/dope house. I was working, making good money at an A & P grocery store, could afford rent, and pay for my car expenses. In my mind, life was good, and I didn't think I had a problem.

By the time I was 19, I entered my first lesbian relationship with a woman who was an entertainer by night and worked for the City of Chicago during the day. I became paranoid from the PCP and afraid of being harmed because I was a lesbian. That neighborhood was considered red neck and neo-Nazi, white supremacist. I thought I was being cool, but I was in trouble with the drugs and alcohol. The paranoia caused me to become suicidal, and I ran my car into a brick wall to kill myself before the neo-Nazis killed me. I ended up in a psych ward I thought due to being suicidal and not from the drugs and alcohol. After I was labeled crazy, that gave me license to continue with the drugs and alcohol. That way I didn't have to quit. *(That is some serious denial)*. It was better to be crazy than to be a drug addict.

Question: How long did your precontemplation last?

Answer: I eventually lost my job. After my parents died one year apart, I drank more and used less drugs. After I lost my job, I lost my apartment, and had to move in with a half-sister (a child of my father's).

Question: What made you think you had a problem?

(C) – I can't make it on my own, and now I'm dependent. I met a man, and we would do drugs and drink. He was cashing bad checks, and I didn't want to get into trouble. He drowned on North Avenue beach when he got pulled to his death in an undercurrent. I am maybe contemplating how bad the drug scene is, so I quit the drugs and enrolled in beauty school. I began drinking more and more with a classmate. My behavior was reckless; in school, we'd wash a customer's hair, put them under the dryer, and leave to drink and

never return that day. I quit school before I got kicked out and realized I had a problem. I wanted to slow down drinking and drugging but not quit. I discovered shooting pool and gambling so drinking increased and drugs decreased. I knew I had a drinking problem, but I was still able to drink and live with her half-sister, because she didn't charge me rent and fed me. Since my parents were dead and I was getting SSA I had money to gamble and drink. I knew I had a problem, but I had enablers who housed me and fed me and some income for social activities, gambling, and a car. Physically I was not damaged.

Question: Christine, your story is painful and interesting at the same time. Was there an event that made you decide to do something different?

(P) I knew I had a problem when I passed out in the back seat of my car with a lit cigarette, and the car caught on fire. The Berwyn fire department pulled you out of the car, a blue Monte Carlo. Then I decided to go to treatment. I told people what they wanted to hear like I would stop drinking, but told myself, I'll drink less,

Question: How did you end up in treatment?

(A) My first treatment was at West Lake Hospital on their detox and rehab unit. I was not committed to stopping and wanted to control it so I could get high and support myself. Shortly after West Lake, I went to Chicago Addiction Treatment Cent (CATC) at 26th and California 2 times. I entered the Share Program 2 times, Cross Road once and left AMA.

I was in a contemplation and action cycle for some years. I would go into treatment for 28 days and relapse within 30 days. The treatment episodes were like rest stops to take a break and recharge my battery. I had no real commitment to sobriety.

(C) Sometimes I would relapse and go to a gay bar. I picked up a woman who taught me how to shoot heroin and about pimps. She would pick up a trick and one of us would hide in the closet. While one had sex with the man the other of us would be in the closet and pick his pocket. I got caught up with a well-known pimp on the west side of Chicago, and one day he saw me walking the streets and he slapped me across the face with a rubber hose for messing with his money and his reputation. I wanted to disassociate myself from him. That was the end of prostitution and stealing from Johns. Soon after, I met Jim, a high-rolling womanizer, who had a lot of high-rise buildings in downtown Chicago. He liked me and kept me financially. I was considered one in his harem. He could not be true to one woman. We traveled together, and Jim kept my pockets full of money while he kept me in one of his luxury apartments. He controlled me with material wealth.

(A) While with Jim, I was not self-sufficient. He gave me a car, and I got a DUI. I was arrested and taken to jail. While in lockup, I faked a seizure and ended up in the hospital and on probation for the DUI. I went to treatment.

(R) I met a few ladies in there, and we all relapsed together. I wanted and needed my driver's license and knew the only way to get it back was to get sober.

(A) The last treatment center I entered was in Will County, then to a half-way house, Bridge House, in Waukegan. My social life was wrapped up in drinking. There were certain people I had to drink to socialize with. I had to leave Chicago because I knew if I was there, I'd go to a gay bar or back to Jim. When I came home, I went to my sister Lyn to live. I started going to AA meetings after my last treatment. I met a woman, Jeanette, at an AA meeting. She became my first sponsor in AA and would pick me up and take me to meetings because I did not have a driver's license yet. Jeanette took no excuse for missing a meeting.

Question: After getting arrested and being on probation, was that what made you stop for good?

(M) After 5 or 6 months in Bridge House, I was no longer drinking. My last treatment and probation from the DUI ended up with me stopping.

Question: How did you stay in the maintenance phase?

(M) I went to meetings. I made friends at the meetings who wanted to be sober and have real relationships not based on sex. To stay in the maintenance phase I had to change friends and go to activities that did not include drinking. I stayed single from intimate sexual relationships for about 10 years, because previously all my relationships included drinking, going to gay bars to meet people. I worked the 12 -steps of AA with my sober friends and we encouraged one another.

Question: How long have you been in the maintenance phase of change?

I've been sober since 1985!

ANTHONY'S WINDING PATH TO RECOVERY

Question: Hello, Anthony, and thank you for agreeing to this interview. I know you are familiar with the stages of change as it pertains to recovery from a substance use disorder. Will you take me on your recovery journey?

(P) I stayed in my precontemplation or denial stage for years because I told myself, I was having fun. As a youth, I lived in Alabama with my grandparents and some uncles. I had an uncle who was moon shining, and I was in his presence until I was 6. During that time, I saw a lot. From a child's perspective, their life seemed exciting. They gave me alcohol to put me to sleep and to put hair on my chest. At 7, my mother took me to Chicago to live with her and my older brothers. The men in my life gave me Giblets Gin then Bacardi Rum. At age 13 I felt I was grown and wanted to be like the older men in my life who were stylish, drove fast cars, and had fast, pretty, well-dressed women on their arms. All that was appealing to me. My peers looked up to me because I was bigger and taller than them, charismatic, and I knew the streets. Drinking was the first step to

being cool. I lost my virginity at age 13 with an older girl and thought I was really a man.

When in high school I started drinking cough syrup with DM (dextromethorphan). I'd take the train to neighborhoods where it was easy to purchase and I wasn't carded, because I looked older than my age. (An age limit existed to purchase Robitussin DM.) Being cool was important to me, so I'd take cough syrup to my buddies and share it with them. I began dealing marijuana in high school. It was easy, because an older brother supplied the drug to me at 14 and 15.

Question: Were there any consequences to dealing drugs?

I got into fights to keep my status, and my older brothers had my back. Plus, I was a big guy.

By age 17, I dropped out of high school and got a job in a restaurant. I sold marijuana to the customers. The boss allowed it because selling marijuana brought in steady customers. I lost my job in the restaurant for stealing meat. Still doing marijuana, drinking alcohol, I pivoted quickly to another job.

Question: Was smoking marijuana a gateway drug to stronger substances for you?

My older brother introduced me to cocaine at age 18. We tried selling cocaine, but I liked the product. I began first with snorting then progressed free basing. This was before the crack that is smoked now. By 18, I was a father. I met the mother of my first child and we both smoked cocaine and sold it as well. Quickly, I became my best customer.

Cocaine took over my life, and I started doing dangerous and stupid stuff. Went to jail for strong arm robbery for 1 year trying to take money and drugs from a person.

Question: While you were in jail did you realize you had a drug problem?

(C) After I got out of jail, I decided that I needed to use less. I left the mother of my first son because she was a cocaine user too. I thought to control my cocaine use; I needed to be with a woman who did not use. I worked at Zayres, a department store in the neighborhood, and sold cocaine around the store. I lost that job for absences. I got a job at the Chicago Stadium and worked at the Black Hawk's games. I sold marijuana and cocaine at the stadium.

When the ice hockey season ended, I got a job driving a truck for Coca Cola. Cocaine was what I did as much as I could. I made all my deliveries and could not remember how I made them.

I would get paid on Friday and go home on Sunday penniless. This caused distress in the family for my new woman and our now 5 sons. I lost the job at Coca Cola and got another job with a security firm. I worked in a high rise building where I sold some and used some.

(C) At this time, I was beginning to realize that I had a problem. The money was leaving as fast as it came. I knew I needed to change some things. My mind was made up to stop. I cashed a check, had money in my pocket, and no longer wanted to use, but the cravings were overwhelming. I went and bought cocaine. When I came home, my wife and I had a fight. She called the police on me, and I got the walk around the block with the cops. Stopped selling because I knew selling leads to using.

(P) Somewhere between 1988 and 1989 my wife and I made the call to Lifeline drug treatment center.

(A) A car picked us up, took us to the treatment facility, and did an interview. Lifeline wanted me to stay in treatment that day. I left that interview and was sober on my own for about a month.

The car broke down and I would dangerously jerry rig it to make it run. I went back to work and got the car fixed.

(R) I relapsed and started doing life-threatening things to keep using. I'd buy cocaine, use the cocaine, and sell dummy bags.

Question: Anthony, what are dummy bags?

(C) Dummy bags are bags filled with a substance that only looked like cocaine. Some of my buddies got gunned down for selling dummy bags of dope. Even with associates dyeing, I'm not totally committed to recovery. When my guys got shot, I only used drugs at home and stopped selling. I only used at home in the basement in isolation.

Still desperate for cocaine, I tried to rob a woman of her purse. She resisted giving up her purse, and a bystander called the police. I ran, the cops caught me, took me down on the ground, and I went back to jail.

(A) 5-16-1989 that was my last run with cocaine. I call that a rescue and not an arrest. I was in Cook County Jail for a simple robbery for 6 months. The judge referred me to Gateway instead of going to prison.

In Gateway, I got serious about changing my life. After being in treatment for 11 months, I was committed to change and had to admit to myself that I had contemplated suicide a few times. I completed treatment and left in September, and Gateway called me back, gave me a night staff position, and sent me to school during the day.

Question: What have been some of the struggles with staying sober in the maintenance phase of your stages of change?

I've had no relapses since release from Gateway. My brothers and friends who were still in the game wanted me back with them, but I cut myself away from them. I got a new peer group that was recovering. I stayed away from home for years and only went to be with my wife and children on the weekends. 5 years into recovery, I returned home, and my wife tried to manipulate me by encouraging me to drink. She said, "You can have one drink. It won't hurt you." I

processed her statement with my support group and decided for us to separate. To avoid places, I stayed in an apartment in Lake Villa supplied by Gateway where I was working at night and going to the College of Lake County during the day. A trigger for me was celebrating special occasions. I'd have cravings to drink and use cocaine at parties because that was my old pattern. When I had urges, I'd leave the situations that threatened my sobriety. Historically, when I got upset, alcohol was a quick fix. I had to learn new avenues to cope with my anger. I started coaching baseball at the YMCA in a different neighborhood than where I grew up. I stayed physically active and that kept me from running to the liquor store. I started bowling in 1997 and that is my main social outlet.

Question: Anthony, have you had any relapses since you entered Gateway?

None to drugs and alcohol. Rarely do I cuss people in my anger. I didn't hit anybody and never went back to jail. The biggest part of recovery is managing emotions. I internalized the 12 steps of recovery, and they became my foundation. I got honest with myself and others, hoped it would work, and had faith in the outcome.

CONCLUSION

The stages of change can be applied to stopping substance use disorder, or any other unwanted, unhealthy behavior. As you can see from the stories of Christine and Anthony, the stages of change are not a straight line to the finish line termed recovery or maintenance. The path is circuitous.

Wanting to change is not a prerequisite to change; just being willing to take the first step of admitting there is a problem is your launching pad from precontemplation to contemplation. Preparation is planning to change. Make your preparation step as concrete as possible. Make your plan a reality by putting it into action. If you slip and fall back into the unwanted behavior, revisit the plan, revise the plan, and start again.

My motto is plan your day and live your plan. Recovery is possible!

