



## Stages of Change Model - An extract from Happy Healthy Sober

Rather than just focusing on one issue, it's important that we look at ourselves as a whole, our sober body (what we eat and what we drink), our sober head, our sober heart to include relationships, sex, family and parenting, and our sober soul to keep our energy flowing for ultimate health and wellbeing.

However, before we start, let's have a recap and look at our habits and behaviours with drink and the stages we go through before quitting. This will help you identify where you are in your journey.

**Let me introduce you to the Stages of Change Model**, also known as the Transtheoretical Model, developed in the late 1970s by James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente who were working with smokers who wanted to quit. The model focuses on the decision-making aspects of change, looking at our habitual behaviours and how ready we are to change.

This model illustrates six stages that people typically move through, which can be helpful when focusing on ditching the booze. They are:

**Pre-contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance and Termination\* (see below for the alternative to termination)**

**Pre-contemplation** is the stage for many grey area drinkers, when we are unaware that we have a problem, or that our behaviour produces negative consequences. Many of us drink alcohol for years, feeling terrible, suffering hangover after hangover but, bizarrely, not making the link between the destructive behaviour and our anxiety, stress or temporary ill health.

At this stage there is no desire to change.

**Contemplation** is when we become aware that our behaviour may be problematic. We may start to see that our drinking is impacting on others. We start to think about reducing our drinking or think about drinking mindfully or have some alcohol-free days. The model says that at this stage people often place equal emphasis on both the negatives and the positives of making a change, so typically we might be telling ourselves we should plan a bit of a detox from drinking but also be conscious that this might affect our social life and friendships. Often we are thinking about or planning some behavioural change but don't necessarily put it into action.

**Preparation** is when we feel a sense of determination, and will often take some steps towards changing our behaviour, recognising that it could lead to a healthier life. This is often the time that people do an alcohol-free challenge, perhaps Dry January or Sober October.

At this stage we may realise that we aren't the only ones in this situation. When we see that there is a whole sober world of people who feel the same way and are support of our new healthy choices it's liberating! When they first discover The Sober Club community, many people say: 'I've found my tribe'. As humans there is a strong need to belong. Community is everything!

**Action** is the stage where we change our behaviour and continue with this positive behaviour change, often starting to modify other behaviours in order to support these changes. We may start to realise that we have been deluded and we may discover new aspects of ourselves. Many of us start to recognise the need for self-esteem and self-care. It's also really important to be reinforcing the benefits we are feeling.

**Maintenance** is ongoing. It's when you have managed to sustain positive behaviour change for more than six months and have every intention going forward. In terms of sobriety, this is usually when we start to really catch sight of that better life without alcohol, and are replacing our old habits with new ones. Preparation is critically important here. We need to source drinks which do not contain alcohol. so that we won't 'end up' drinking alcohol because there is nothing else.

The final stage is sometimes described as **Relapse**, a common experience. Of course, the aim is not to let setbacks undermine your confidence to continue, and it's critical to ask yourself what happened before your relapsed? No one just falls onto a drink, there is usually some lead-up, a thought process or some kind of emotional turbulence that went on. The relapses are, of course, what bring the learning, and we can then reaffirm our intentions and do even more preparation.

**Alternatively, the final stage is \*Termination.** Interestingly this wasn't added to the model until later years. This is the point when people are sure that they won't return to their original addictive behaviour and that they won't relapse. In some of the research I did, I was surprised to see that this stage is rarely reached; the majority of people stay in the Maintenance phase.

I believe, however, that a large number of us do indeed achieve this final stage. The new Sober Curious movement has made sobriety cool and something to be revered. When I asked in The Sober Club, several of my members said they were absolutely in the Termination phase and had never been happier. As one man, Alistair, said: *'After two years alcohol-free I am now most definitely a Terminator.'*

If you wanted to look at the **Stages of Change model** from a less academic perspective, I'd say that we could bring in some qualities such as:

**Awareness, Gratitude, Perspective and Forgiveness.**

Addiction and methods of help associated with it have always been quite medical and clinical in their approach, but the reality is most of us don't need clinical or medical intervention, we need connection, we need self-care and self-loving, we need to come back to who we really are, find our joy and our purpose.