



# Drugs and Alcohol: Changing for Good

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Everyone knows that substance abuse can ruin lives. The excessive use of alcohol or drugs causes medical and psychological dysfunction, and severe problems within the family.

We also know how difficult it is to break a substance addiction. People typically attempt to quit their addictive substance numerous times before they are finally successful. And addiction treatment programs have only modest success rates.

Problem is, the excessive use of alcohol or drugs changes the brain chemistry in such a way that people feel compelled to use. To them, quitting seems almost impossible. In spite of all the negative consequences, they continue to use.

## What Can Help?

In a groundbreaking book called *Changing for Good*, the authors reveal six stages of change and explain how individuals can free themselves from bad habits. The authors, three Ph.D.'s, James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo DiClemente, conducted more than 50 studies over twelve years representing more than \$35 million in research funding.

In study after study, the six-stage model has proven to be sound. The six stages are:

1. Precontemplation – In this stage, excessive users not only can't see the solution, they can't see the problem. They don't believe they have a problem so, of course, they don't need to change. But people around them can see problems developing due to the substance abuse.
2. Contemplation – In this stage, people start to think that they do have a problem. They try to understand it, to learn its causes, and they wonder about how to solve it. They believe that some day they will need to change but they think this day is sometime in the future.
3. Preparation – Most individuals in this stage are planning to take action within a month. They're going to break their addiction and change their lives. The point here is that they're making plans. They may still be questioning some of their motives and trying to convince themselves that they need to take action soon.
4. Action – At this stage, people stop using. They pour out the rest of that bottle of vodka. They break or tear up their drug paraphernalia and throw it in the trash. They decide they're not going to hang with the same old crowd. They stop going to the same old places. They don't pick up. They don't use.
5. Maintenance – At this stage, people work on maintaining their clean and sober lifestyle. They find ways to prevent lapses and relapses. They learn how to deal with cravings and how to deal with their emotions without resorting to substances. Often they need to rebuild their family relationships and develop new friendships.
6. Termination – This is the ultimate goal. At this stage, the addictive substance no longer presents any temptation. People have confidence they will never use again. They leave the cycle of change and are free.

## Working from Stage to Stage

So how can this model help you to change?

First, find where you are. You'll have the hardest time if you're in Stage 1. If you're hearing from others that you're drinking too much or using drugs too much, stop for a moment and listen. Ask them what they see.

If you're in Stage 2, you can help yourself by listing all the problems the substances are causing. You still need to ask others what they see happening to you but you're starting to see the problems yourself. Write them down.

In Stage 3, you're planning to quit. You know your reasons. Now you need to strengthen your commitment to change. The bolder your commitment, the better (for example, "I can't touch the stuff anymore. I'm done with it completely").

In Stage 4, you're quitting. Pick a day and quit. Get rid of everything associated with your addiction.

In Stage 5, you need to remain strong. You need to beat the cravings. Keep in mind all the problems your substance use was causing. Start looking at the benefits you gain by staying clean and sober. Consider outside help such as working with a therapist, going to AA or NA, or taking exercise or stress-reduction classes. A mental health therapist or addictions counselor can help with any of these stages but particularly this one. Remember, in this stage, you have successfully broken your addiction.

In Stage 6, everything is okay. If you can get here, you're feeling free. Yet some may never reach this stage. They will continue to crave their substance even after 15, 20 or 30 years in recovery. Others however, after five or ten years, are confident they'll never go back. It depends on a few things: The intensity of the drug used, the duration of use, and the lifestyle changes a person makes in recovery. If you had been using high intensity drugs—alcohol, heroin, cocaine—for 20 to 30 years, you may spend the rest of your life in Stage 5 after breaking your addiction. On the other hand, if you make significant changes in exercise, diet, and the use of stress reduction techniques, you may improve your brain chemistry enough so that cravings go away.

How can you stop substance abuse from ruining your life? Start working through these stages to get yourself free.

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*Rich Bayer, Ph.D.*, is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

For more information contact Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc., 200 Booth Street, Elkton, MD 21921, 410-996-3400. All rights reserved.