



The Cornell Research Program
on *Self-Injury and Recovery*

Understanding and Using the Stages of Change model to assess your own progress

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Have you ever felt frustrated, overwhelmed and discouraged by unsuccessful attempts to stop self-injuring? Have you ever wondered why you don't *just stop*? Do others tell you how much it hurts them that you injure yourself? Unfortunately, once self-injury becomes a habit and something that seems to control unwanted feelings or thoughts it can be really hard to "just stop."

Before you read further, take a moment to settle into your seat, feel your body, take a breath and, when you feel relaxed and open to yourself, answer this question:

On a scale of 1 to 10, how ready am I to stop self-injuring?

Write down your response somewhere and set it aside. We will tell you how to interpret your score in a minute, but let's start with an introduction to the *Stages of Change* framework first.

The Stages of Change Framework

Ending a habit can be really difficult. Self-injury is like this for some people – easy to start and really hard to stop. Why is this? Self-injury, like a variety of other "I want to feel better right now" activities offers a short-term fix to what can feel like an overwhelming or otherwise unmanageable set of feelings or circumstances. If you self-injure and are reading this, you probably know this feeling.

Change takes time and is often a slow process. Just as your self-injury habit didn't start overnight, expecting it to go away quickly can lead to disappointment, embarrassment, and even shame; emotions that can reinforce the very behavior you may wish to stop. Understanding *Stages of Change* frameworks (best described by Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1993), particularly as it relates to self-injury, can be helpful in understanding how authentically ready you are to stop self-injuring. The *Stages of Change* model describes the steps people typically go through inside themselves and outside in the world to prepare for and then carry out behavioral change, like stopping self-injury. The model has five stages and each stage tends to build on the stage before it. It is important to note that the stages of change are **not linear**. You may find yourself moving in and out and between stages at different times. Any movement, however, is a sign of progress and often leaves you better prepared to take on the challenge of change.

Being honest with yourself is one of the first critical steps in assessing where you are in your readiness to find other ways of coping. For example, if you answered below a 5 on the scaled question above, chances are good that you are in an earlier stage of change (pre-contemplation or contemplation). On the other hand, if you responded to the above question with a 5 or above, some part of you (or a lot of you!) has already made a decision to begin the process of moving away from using self-injury as a way of coping.

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The Stages of Change model has five stages. While the points you gave yourself in response to the readiness to change question above are very subjective, they may help you figure out where you are on the continuum:



Precontemplation: During this stage, an individual may not be considering change at all and may not see self-injury as a problem. In fact, a self-injurious person in this stage may defend the benefits of self-injuring and ignore the negative outcomes of it. People in this stage often dismiss those who are worried as nagging or overly concerned about nothing. Someone in this stage may feel that self-injury is his/her own business and of no real consequence.

Contemplation: In this stage, a person is becoming open to the idea of change, but might feel ambivalent about it. A self-injurious person may see some of the negative aspects of self-injury and consider some of the benefits of stopping, but wonder if it is worth giving it up. He/she may frequently change his/her mind about whether or not stopping is a “good” idea.

Preparation: Once in this stage, a person has made a commitment to change and begins to consider lifestyle changes that need to be made. It is not uncommon in this stage to seek out therapy or other supports.

Action: During the Action stage, individuals take active steps towards change and start to become more confident of success. He/she actively uses new coping strategies when triggered. Because a person is trying out new skills in this stage, it is not uncommon for slips or backslides to occur. Adopting and then regularly using new coping skills takes time, practice, and belief in oneself. Practice, patience, and support are critical at this stage.

Maintenance: In this stage, a person is focused on maintaining changes that have been made. Typically, an individual in this stage no longer actively engages in self-injury and uses his/her self-knowledge to more effectively avoid or work with triggers. He/she has developed positive coping skills to use *instead* of self-injury when the urge arises and is capable of utilizing these skills.

How do you determine which Stage of Change you are in?

If you are working with a therapist, this is one sign that you have already put some effort into figuring this out – particularly if you sought therapy to help treat your self-injury. This may be something you can talk about with your therapist. Self-injury is often a byproduct of a complex set of life challenges and it can take time to understand, accept, and learn other ways of dealing with the thoughts and feelings that come up in response to these challenges. Understanding where you are in this process and helping other people in your life who may be a support for you will assist in your recovery journey. Inviting others, like parents or other people who love you, to understand your recovery process can help them serve as better supports for you. It also opens the door to discussion about family communication, interactions, and roles.

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What do you need to know and do to move through the stages of change?

For real change to happen you need to have

- ▶ **Hope** for a future that does not include self-injury
- ▶ **Confidence** that change is possible
- ▶ **Intention** to put time and effort into making changes
- ▶ **Ability** to identify *and* practice the skills needed to stop the behavior
- ▶ **Resoluteness** in applying focus and discipline to making real and sustained change

All of these are elements of **self-awareness** that every person needs to make positive change in his/her life. This self-awareness can be gained in a variety of ways but here are a few questions that you can ask yourself to assess hope, confidence, intention, ability, and resoluteness:

Identifying Areas of Growth:

*Directions: Rate your response to each question below on a scale of 1-7. You can record your answers on a sheet of paper or circle your answer on the scale provided. Try to be totally honest with yourself. You need not share your answers with anyone else if you do not wish to. **Before you begin, take a moment to get into a quiet space inside yourself** since this is the best way to hear yourself be honest (sometimes our honest voice is very quiet). Go somewhere without distractions, close your eyes, and take some time to orient yourself to your body and to your present state of mind. Relax your body and mind as you take some deep, slow breaths and focus your attention on the present moment. Now ask yourself the following questions:*

- 1 *How hopeful am I feeling that I can have a life that does not include self-injury?*
—Not at all hopeful 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Extremely hopeful
- 2 *How easy is it for me to picture or imagine living my life without self-injury?*
—Not at all easy 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Extremely easy
- 3 *How confident am I feeling that I can stop self-injuring altogether at some point in my life?*
—Not at all confident 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Extremely confident
- 4 *How confident am I feeling that I can stop injuring myself sometime in the very near future?*
—Not at all confident 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Extremely confident
- 5 *How much energy and effort am I willing to put into learning about things that I can do instead of harming myself?*
—No energy and effort 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 All of my energy and effort
- 6 *How much time and effort do I intend to put into seriously stopping soon?*
—No time and effort 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 All of my time and effort
- 7 *Can I identify specific things that I need to do to stop self-injuring? (This might include things like learning new coping skills, dealing with underlying issues or emotions, going to therapy,*

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joining a new group, beginning to make changes in other parts of my life, etc.)

—I can't identify any specific things 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 I can identify many specific things

- 8** *Am I taking the specific steps I can identify to move towards stopping? (e.g. Practicing new coping skills, allowing for feelings that I may not have previously accepted such as grief or fear, having conversations that I needed to have, taking positive risks in other parts of my life, engaging support systems, identifying and utilizing my strengths, etc.)*
—I'm not taking any specific steps 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 I am taking all of the specific steps that I can identify to move towards stopping
- 9** *How dedicated am I to stopping self-injury behavior, even when I have strong urges, thoughts, or wishes to do so?*
—Not at all resolute/dedicated 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Extremely resolute/dedicated
- 10** *How important is it for me to live my life without self-injury?*
—Not at all important 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 Extremely important

Now, record your scores for each question in the space provided, and then sum the questions as indicated. Your total scores will range between 2 and 14 for each of the areas below and these sums will help you identify areas for growth:

Question 1 ___ + Question 2 ___ = Total score questions 1 + 2 (Hope): ___

Question 3 ___ + Question 4 ___ = Total score questions 3 + 4 (Confidence): ___

Question 5 ___ + Question 6 ___ = Total score questions 5 + 6 (Intention): ___

Question 7 ___ + Question 8 ___ = Total score questions 7 + 8 (Ability): ___

Question 9 ___ + Question 10 ___ = Total score questions 9 + 10 (Resoluteness): ___

Interpreting your scores:

You total scores for each two questions summed above will correspond to the areas described in detail below. Generally speaking, a total score between 2-5 indicates a low score in that capacity; 6-10 a mid-range score in that area, and an 11-14 a high score.

Total Scores:	2 3 4 5	6 7 8 9 10	11 12 13 14
	Low	Mid	High

Generally, areas in which you've scored low and mid-range are areas that are challenging for you and where you should focus your attention in order to build your capacities for growth.

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Identifying areas for growth: Hope

If you find that you've rated yourself low on hope, it is most likely because you are not ready to change and you do not see the benefits of stopping at this point. It may be hard for you to face your life without self-injury in it.

A great way to begin to generate hope is to start small by simply treating yourself kindly and with compassion. Look for opportunities throughout the day to do things that make you feel good and cared for. Some examples are taking a long bath or hot shower, listening to uplifting or soothing music, taking a walk in nature, or snuggling in a favorite blanket with tea, cocoa or another soothing drink. There is no shortage of ideas and it can really help to take a few moments to jot down a few that you know or think might work for you. In short, any small or large action you take to care for yourself makes you feel better and creates a greater sense of optimism about the future.

Also try to limit exposure to negative messages. Feelings of hope and optimism are stifled by continual exposure to negative information or even just too much information and stimulus in general - from the media, social networks, texting, television, etc. Negative friends, gossip, and even media saturation can have an overwhelming effect of your emotions. Take a quick evaluation of the types of friends and/or media you tune into and consider reducing your exposure to people and media that sap your energy or sense of wellbeing.

If you are low on hope, you most likely will find your focus drawn to negative aspects of living. You may ruminate about war, famine, climate change, and political instability. You may focus only on the negative things others say to you, rather than remember the positive things. It can feel almost as if you're living with "blinders on" and those blinders keep you from seeing all the good in yourself and in the world. It can be difficult to become open to seeing what *is* possible rather than what *is not* possible when negative thought patterns dominate. The critical first step is: Finding, writing down and questioning the basic truth of the stressful thoughts that keep you cornered. Once you determine what your personal self-critical thoughts are, you can ask yourself some questions along the following lines:

- ▶ Am I absolutely sure that this is 100% true all of the time?
- ▶ Is there any time that this is not true? Can I think of any exceptions?
- ▶ If my best-friend or parent knew about this thought, what would they offer as evidence to the contrary?
- ▶ Am I *always* right or have there been times in my life when I was wrong about something I thought was true? Could this be one of those times?

Some other ways to generate hope:

- ▶ Keep a list of things you are thankful for (even if they are very small things at first) so that you can look at this list in dark moments.
- ▶ Do something to help others: volunteer at a homeless shelter or your local SPCA, take food to an older person in your neighborhood, or volunteer to mow the lawn for a neighbor who has been ill. Helping others increases feelings of self-worth and value and can take the focus off of your own problems.

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- ▶ Take even 5 minutes each day and sit in silence, just breathing and noticing all of the information your senses are capable of picking up on.
- ▶ Ask for help! Tell someone about your difficulty feeling hopeful and positive and take the opportunity to reach out to someone who cares.

Identifying areas for growth: Confidence

Since low self-confidence often comes from self-damaging thoughts, one way to increase self-confidence is simply to watch the thoughts you have in order to “see” from a distance what things you tend to tell yourself (or say about yourself) over and over that affect your feelings. Any thought that depresses your mood or makes you feel low is a confidence damaging thought. The important thing at first is to simply “see” the thoughts without *doing* anything about them. Indeed, self-injury is often a “doing” response to a negative thought-feeling sequence; it just happens so fast that there is no time to question it or realize what is happening. Practice just slowing things down enough to notice the repetitive thoughts and beliefs that eat away at your confidence and sense of well-being. These are called “core beliefs” – thoughts we tend to just assume are true because we have never stopped long enough to question them. Once you *see* these thoughts and beliefs in writing you can begin to question how true they are. You will likely be surprised to learn that many of your thoughts and beliefs about yourself (and others) are not nearly as true as you automatically assume that they are.

Another approach to building self-confidence is to act as if what you would like to happen is actually happening. Ask yourself:

- ▶ If I did believe that I could stop self-injuring, what would I be doing differently? How would I be acting towards myself? How would I be feeling about myself? How would I be speaking to myself? How would I be communicating with others? Engaging in “as-if” questioning can help you move toward action and feel more confident.
- ▶ What are the stressors in my life that are coming between me and confidence? These can be people, thoughts, situations, repeated connection with negative messages (such as through media or music), etc.
- ▶ What can I do to change these stressors?

Once you identify these stressors, you can begin to think about how to change them. After all, if you don’t know what’s stressing you out, you are just reacting. The simple act of identifying your stressors can increase your confidence (and your hope!) because identifying what’s “wrong” is an act of self-care.

Identifying areas for growth: Intention

Intention is a major step toward making change. Intention, simply stated, is the act of openly creating a personal goal. It can be useful to start working with small intentions such as, “I will do at least one caring act for myself every day for the next month and then set my next intention,” and work your way up to bigger, more challenging intentions such as, “I will stop self-injuring for 90 days and then evaluate where I am with it and what I want.” Keep in mind

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that setting intention works quite well as the “north star” guide for changing once you have taken an authentic and deeply honest stock of the thoughts, feelings, people, and situations that tend to throw you off course. This is one of the reasons why starting small is helpful since challenges to the small intentions can help you understand the core issues that keep you injuring in the first place (which will make it hard to stop). Intention without self-knowing will often be frustrating since you may find yourself derailed without understanding why. Taking time to really consider the advice above related to hope and confidence is a key stepping-stone to building intention.

Note, also, that you are likely to falter (e.g. not live up to your intention) and even question your intention as doable or even desirable. You may find yourself wondering if you have the time and whether change is worth the effort in the first place. Thoughts like, “what is wrong with self-injury anyway – it’s no big deal” or “everyone does something to feel better, this is just my thing, so what?” are common. These are the way in which our fears come up to confront the scariness of living differently. These are normal thoughts that come along with most change – some part of us will almost always resist it because living with what we know can seem easier than envisioning a good life with what we do not know. Intention setting and action takes trust, which for many of us, is hard to have if life has been difficult so far. In this case, however, the trust you begin to grow is in *yourself* and that is the very best kind to have since you will always be the only person on the planet who knows what you need most. Who better to trust?

If you find yourself questioning your intention, you may want to ask yourself questions like:

- ▶ What’s the worst that could happen if I attempt something new?
- ▶ What will happen if I “fail” in my efforts to change?
- ▶ What can I learn from this situation?
- ▶ If my best friend was in my situation, what would I advise them to do?
- ▶ How does it benefit me for things to stay just as they are?

These self-questions can heighten your belief in yourself, your understanding that change is inevitable, and your intention to move towards improved emotional health.

Identifying areas for growth: Ability

If you find yourself having difficulty answering the ability questions or you are rating yourself low in them, but you are generally rating yourself higher in hope, confidence, and intention, it is most likely a sign that you should continue to focus on *identifying and practicing skills*. The old adage “practice makes perfect” is a good metaphor for ability. Ability is something that you can create and improve by taking steps each day to **practice** the skills needed to replace self-injury in your life.

What exactly you need to practice, however, is something that takes a little self-study. Maybe you need to practice “speaking your truth” – sharing the deep, often unspoken thoughts or feelings that you have about something. Speaking your truth often starts with telling yourself, but also means speaking this out loud to others. Or, maybe you need to practice

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communicating effectively and assertively, allowing yourself to feel emotions that are painful and that you've avoided in the past. Taking risks such as engaging in new activities, spending time with new people, and acknowledging that you don't have to believe self-critical thoughts, are all things that need to be practiced in order for them to feel more comfortable or "normal." In short, practice whatever it is that you need to do to overcome self-injury.

Remember that slips and even relapse are normal parts of learning and *trying out* new skills. Sometimes new skills work right away and sometimes they do not. Imagine learning a new skill like learning to walk. Babies don't just stand up one day and begin to walk; they scoot, crawl, and begin taking tentative steps to get where they want to go. They also fall – a lot! If new skills don't work right away, it is an opportunity to ask yourself why and make changes or additions, *and keep practicing* with baby steps, so that next time you're ready to use your newfound abilities.

Identifying areas for growth: Resoluteness

If you score high in this area, you are well along the road to recovery from self-injury. You are resolute in your discipline, determination and dedication to not self-injure, and you possess the skills to refrain from doing so, even if the urge still sometimes comes up. You are aware of and possess hope, confidence, intention, ability and skills, and these strengths help you maintain your resoluteness to use other methods of coping.

Individuals who possess resoluteness and all of the self-knowledge and skill it takes to be in a regular state of resoluteness are very well poised to reach out and help others understand their own journey with self-injury or other difficult passages in life. You can be a unique source of support and strength to others who are in earlier stages of life challenge – whether it is self-injury or something else. At the very least, the compassion you have learned to have for yourself can be a source of compassion for others, and this is a gift in and of itself!

Summary

Cultivating the self-knowledge it takes to move through all of the stages needed to change deeply ingrained behaviors, such as self-injury, leaves you more than simply a self-injury free life. It can also leave you a deeper, kinder, gentler, and more powerful person in every area of your life. It truly is worth the journey!

REFERENCES AND OTHER SOURCES CONSULTED

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