

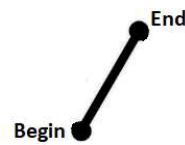
The Change Process

The following contains thoughts and tools related to the process of change. Making changes can seem daunting, and in my experience, people are way too hard on themselves about how to achieve it (me included!). They also tend to minimize or disregard their progress along the way. I hope this handout helps you see changes and make changes in a new, healthier, kinder light.

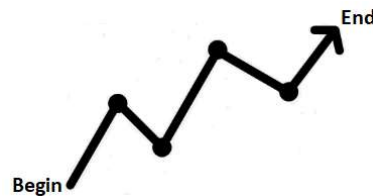
From, Lexi

Change is not always linear.

Some changes occur in a **straight line**. For example, I set a goal, and I make consistent progress toward it until I achieve the intended results:



Another perspective is that change tends to vary over time, meaning “peaks and valleys” to represent **gains and losses**:



This varied line will also have plateaus, which are times when little to no change occurred. **Plateaus** are not shown on the example here, but they would appear as horizontal lines.

I include detailed examples of gains, losses, and plateaus at the end.

By “gains,” I refer to times when we moved *toward* our goal. For example, we may have stopped (or decreased) a negative behavior or began (or increased) a positive behavior.

By “losses,” I refer to times when we moved *away* from our goal. For example, we may have returned to (or increased) a negative behavior.

By “plateaus,” I refer to times when we *maintained* our progress, meaning we didn’t move toward or away from our goal. We stayed the same.

Whether we are thinking or speaking, the **language** we use to describe our change process determines how we feel about it and creates our “mindset.” When we use negative words and phrases, we tend to feel bad (e.g., discouraged, disappointed, angry, insufficient, incompetent, pessimistic, or hopeless). When we use positive words and phrases, we tend to feel good (e.g., encouraged, proud, happy, capable, competent, optimistic, or hopeful.)

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Negative Mindset

1. When plateaus occur, people may interpret them as losses versus just standing still. For example, we might unknowingly discourage ourselves by saying things like, “I was doing so well, and now I’m not getting anywhere,” or “Nothing’s changing.”
2. Speaking of failing, I highly recommend not using any variation of the word “fail.” For a lot of us, it has a strong negative connotation. This means the feelings that the word elicits are bad in nature and may call up unproductive messages (see #4).
3. A cognitive distortion known as “should statements” can also increase discouragement, make changes seem harder, and make us feel like we can’t express any negative feelings. Should statements can cause us to feel inadequate and incapable. For example, “This should be easy.” “I should’ve been able to reach my goal by now.” “I should know how to do this.” “I shouldn’t complain.” Variations on the word “should” include: “Supposed to and ought to.”
4. Some of us have internalized negative messages about change that we heard during our childhoods and/or from sources in society. For example: “Just do it.” (Sure, sometimes it’s that easy, but sometimes it’s not!) Other examples: “No pain no gain” and “If you can’t change something, you’re weak, stupid, not dedicated, not trying hard enough, hopeless, etc.” Buying into these messages can undermine confidence and can otherwise cause a myriad of bad feelings directed at yourself, such as: Doubt, blame, embarrassment, judgement, and self-loathing.
5. Many times, when experiencing a loss, I have heard people say things like: “I had a setback.” “I’m backsliding.” “Back to square one.” When asked what they mean by those words, people responded that it felt like they were “going back to the beginning” or “having to start all over.” A similar statement is: “One step forward, two steps back.” These descriptions can misrepresent where you are in the change process. Granted, if you were on step two and went back a step, you would officially be back at the beginning. However, if you completed eight steps (for example) and went back a step, that would mean being at step seven versus returning to step one. Thinking you are back at the start can translate into, “All my progress was lost,” no matter how many steps you’ve completed. Feeling that way could contribute to giving up (e.g., “Why try?”).
6. The phrases “I ruined it” or “I blew it” seem like variations of “back to square one.” If they refer to a single step, then they would be accurate although negative in tone. However, if we use them to represent a *total* loss as above, they are harmful to us and to our change process.

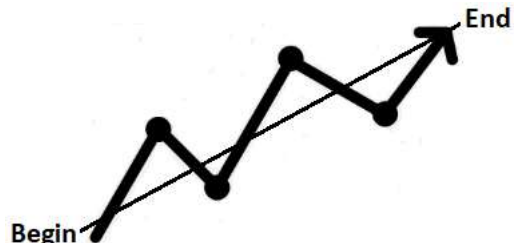
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7. One more point on wording: Notice how often the word “back” shows up! Consider the cumulative effect of using certain negative words over and over again.

Positive Mindset + Tools

1. There are lots of informational sources and opinions about setting and achieving goals. Pick and choose from those, if you wish, but I also encourage you to develop and to carry out the change process in your own way and on your own terms.
2. Regarding the sample words and phrases in this handout, I highly recommend that you **personalize** and customize them. Use words and phrases that have positive meaning to you, that resonate with you, that “pack a punch,” and that otherwise just “feel right.”
3. Similarly, it’s not my intention to demonize all negative words. If you can use them and they don’t bother you, carry on! My concern is when certain words drag us down.
4. Speaking of wording, how you word your **goal** can affect your perception of change:
 - a. When we say, “I want to stop _____,” that can create a belief that I’m only successful when I reach the end versus being successful along the way. For example, “Sure, I did it a little less, but I haven’t stopped yet.”
 - b. You might consider a slight variation like: “I want to reduce or stop _____.” This way, you continue to be successful at each step toward the goal’s completion.
 - c. Also, you may decide that setting a goal to do something (or not do something) “most of the time” or “more often than not” works for you.
5. Plateaus can be seen as a form of progress depending on your perspective. Making any changes and maintaining them equals **success** unless you tell yourself otherwise.
6. Using different words can help so-called setbacks feel easier to take: “I failed” or “I totally blew it” can become: “I didn’t meet my goal today.” Adding “softer” words may help too: “I had a *temporary* setback” or “I fell back *a bit*” or “I lost *a little* ground.”
7. Since thoughts create feelings, thinking positively about change can help us get through so-called “setbacks.” For example, a person could experience a plateau or a loss and still feel light-hearted, **optimistic**, or otherwise unbothered by choosing thoughts that promote those feelings (e.g., “No big deal,” “I’ll take another run at it tomorrow,” “Everybody takes a step back now and then”). These kinds of statements can counteract or “soften” disappointment, discouragement, and other negative feelings.
8. Focus on what was *gained* versus lost while still **validating** your negative feelings. In other words, you’re not being asked to deny or to minimize any feelings; they deserve to be heard. However, focusing on them more than briefly can bring you down.

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- a. One technique that may help you direct focus toward gains is called “ending on the positive.” This involves reversing the order of a sentence that has the word “but” in the middle, aiming to place the **positive** part at the end (probably self-evident!). Note: Keeping the negative part of the sentence versus removing it helps validate our feelings as mentioned above.
 - b. When we use sentences that “end on the negative,” we’re left with the bad feelings. For example, “Sure, I took a step forward, but I took two back.” The forward step gets lost or negated here.
 - c. Using the same sentence, switch the words around to end on the better-feeling part. “I took two steps back, but I also took a step **forward**.” You can edit the wording when needed to make sense or to help make it feel as good as possible.
 - d. In addition, you can tack on even more positives to the end of the sentence. Using the same example, “I took two steps back, but I also took a step forward...” You could add: “And that feels really good!” “And that counts as progress!” “And that’s better than nothing!” “And that gives me a little **hope**, at least!”
9. Another important point about change is to notice that your progress is “**trending upward**.” If you were to draw a straight line from beginning to end, despite gains and losses, the result remains the same. This can help people feel hopeful even if their changes seem to be taking longer than expected. “I’m getting there!”
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10. **Encourage** and motivate yourself but not in fake, mean, or harsh ways. For example, you might say: “Wow, I’m doing great!” (and think “yeah right”). You might think: “You idiot, you’re failing miserably” (and then feel horrible enough to quit). Genuine and kind ways to cheer yourself on may sound like: “I did it!” “I’m making it!” “I can do this!”
11. **Celebrate** ALL progress, even it seems minimal. Give yourself credit for every step.
12. Trying counts too! The word “try” can be tricky because it is used to describe an attempt to do something that didn’t work. When this happens, it’s easy to insult ourselves (e.g., with words like ~~stupid~~, ~~lazy~~, ~~failure~~, etc). I suggest that people replace the word “trying” with “doing,” because by trying, you still “did something” toward your goal.

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13. Similar to the word “trying,” you may consider that *thinking about* taking action counts as **progress**, too, since thinking means you are one step closer to doing (versus not thinking about it at all). So, “I did nothing today” can become, “At least I thought about doing something today!”
14. Once we achieve a change, we might expect it to last “forever.” Some people *can* completely stop (or start) a behavior and never go back. For others, there are times when the behavior resurfaces to varying degrees. If this occurs, **take heart** and begin your change process again, if and when you choose. Don’t be hard on yourself for the recurrence. It happens, especially in times of stress and vulnerability.
15. Most importantly, please follow your own guidance, and be **kind** to yourself.

I hope this gives you helpful ideas on how to develop your own custom change process!

The next two pages have examples of gains, losses, plateaus, and +/- thoughts.

Revised: 9-2025

The Change Process

Examples of Gains, Losses, and Plateaus

GOAL #1

Reduce or stop biting my nails.

PERIOD OF TIME DURING WHICH TO EVALUATE CHANGES (e.g., AM/PM, day, week, month)

Daily

GAINS

I didn't bite my nails at all today. I bit my nails less times during the day than I normally do. I bit only seven nails instead of all ten (even just one counts!). I bit on my left hand but not on my right hand. I bit my nails but not as far down. I put my fingers in my mouth but didn't bite any. I bit my nails on one day but not the next. I tried to not chew my nails, but I did (trying counts). I thought about biting my nails but didn't.

Remember: Even if seemingly "small," all forward movement counts as progress.

LOSSES

I bit my nails as much as I did before I set my goal (I went back to my original behavior). I bit my nails even worse than when I set my goal.

These are losses, but any changes I made before them still count as progress.

I can remind myself of my intentions and start again without beating myself up.

PLATEAUS

I bit my nails in exactly the same amount and in the same way as I did yesterday. I didn't do it more or less. Everything stayed the same.

Plateaus also count as progress because I didn't revert to the original behavior or worse.

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE THOUGHTS

- "I bit almost all my nails again. I'm not getting anywhere."
- + "I only bit three nails on each hand today. Maybe tomorrow I can try for two."
- "Yeah, my nails are growing a little bit, but they're not as long as I want them to be."
- + "I wish my nails were longer, but I like seeing the way they're growing back."
- "I should be able to quit this habit. I'm such an idiot!"
- + "Biting my nails doesn't make me a bad person. I'm getting there!"

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GOAL #2

Reduce or stop procrastinating.

PERIOD OF TIME DURING WHICH TO EVALUATE CHANGES (e.g., AM/PM, day, week, month)

Varies per task (some set deadlines and some self-selected)

GAINS

I didn't procrastinate at all today, this weekend, this week, etc. I procrastinated less than I normally do (e.g., for a few hours instead of a day, for a few days instead of a week, etc.). I started a task on time even though I didn't finish it right away. I didn't wait until the last minute (which counts even if I finished two minutes before the deadline!). I tried to start on time, but I didn't (trying still counts). I thought about procrastinating, but I didn't.

Remember: Even if seemingly "small," all forward movement counts as progress.

LOSSES

I procrastinated as much as I did before setting my goal (I went back to my original behavior). I procrastinated even more than when I set this goal.

*These are losses, but any changes I made before them still count as progress.
I can remind myself of my intentions and start again without beating myself up.*

PLATEAUS

I didn't procrastinate any more or any less than I did since the last time. It stayed the same.

Plateaus also count as progress because I didn't revert to the original behavior or worse.

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE THOUGHTS

- "I got done a minute early, big deal. I bet it won't last."
- + "At least finishing a minute early is an improvement. Maybe next time I can do five."
- "Sure, I didn't put anything off on Monday, but then I did it the next two days."
- + "I wish I hadn't slipped up on the other days, but I'm counting Monday as a success."
- "Everyone else gets their stuff done on time. I feel like a loser!"
- + "Procrastination is not a character defect. I know I can figure this out."