



Six Stages of Behavioral Change:

A Practical Guide to Becoming Who You Actually Want to Be

Behavioral change isn't about motivation. It's not about saying, "I'm going to be different tomorrow." Most people have already tried that and failed. Real change is a process. It's emotional. It's messy. It requires you to face things you've avoided for years. And most importantly, it requires you to stop lying to yourself.

This framework walks you through the six stages you will encounter when trying to change any behavior—whether that's avoidance, anger, dishonesty, insecurity, or self-sabotage. You will not move through these stages perfectly. You will repeat them. You will get stuck in some of them. That's part of it. The goal is not perfection. The goal is awareness and forward movement.

Stage 1: Grief

Something in me was hurt—and I need to face it.

Before behavior can change, you have to understand why it exists. Most unhealthy behaviors are not random... they are responses. They were built to protect you at some point in your life.

When you identify these points of pain you feel grief over how you were hurt. You start to recognize what hurt you, what you did not receive, and/or what you needed but never got. And this realization carries weight. You can feel sad, empty, angry... all of these feelings are normal and OK.

This stage is uncomfortable because it forces you to slow down and feel what you've likely spent years avoiding. What matters here is not fixing, but allowing. If you rush past grief, you will carry it into every stage that follows.

Reflect on what you are actually grieving, what you did not receive, and where did this all begin?

Stage 2: Victimization

I didn't deserve what happened to me.

This is where you acknowledge something important: You were hurt and it mattered.

There is a tendency in self-improvement to skip this step and to jump straight into judgment or responsibility, but if you skip this stage, you will quietly carry resentment and confusion into everything you do.

Recognize that someone failed you, hurt you, and you were shaped by things beyond your control. You need this clarity, but there is a line here. You are a victim of what happened, but you cannot build your identity around being a victim. If you stay here too long, your past will start dictating your future.

Stage 3: Righteousness

I'm right—and I deserve something for that.

After feeling powerless, you begin to reclaim your voice. This is anger that needs to be understood or be validated. It is a need for justice. This stage can feel empowering. For the first time, you're not just hurting, but you're pushing back.

But here's the problem: Righteousness often mistakes being right for being healed. You can be completely right about what happened to you and still be stuck. So, you start to blame others, justify your behavior, or stay focused on what others did instead of what you're doing.

This stage is necessary, but it's incomplete. It gives you a voice, but it doesn't give you growth.

Reflect on if being right is now more important than getting better, and if this mindset is helping or hindering you.

Stage 4: Reality

What is actually true... including my part in it?

This is where change really begins. You move from emotion to evaluation and from blame to responsibility.

Or better put: from your perspective to the truth (as best as you can understand it).

This is the moment to look for patterns, and really start to see what you do (behaviors) and why. If hurt people hurt people, then you can start to see the reality that you are hurt and you hurt others.

This is not about dismissing your pain, rather it's about recognizing a difficult truth: You can be both hurt and responsible at the same time. That tension is where growth lives.

This stage requires honesty, and honesty is uncomfortable. But without it, nothing changes.

Stage 5: Humility

I see it—and I'm willing to own it.

Humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's seeing yourself clearly.

Often, people will get to the reality stage and it is too uncomfortable, so they bounce back to righteousness, victimization, or grief. If you stick with it, though, your defenses will start

to fade. You will stop needing to win, and be more curious about understanding why. In short, with humility, you become open to growth.

This stage can feel heavy, but it's actually freeing. Once you stop defending who you've been, you finally have space to become someone different.

Stage 6: Small Actions & Reflection

I change by what I consistently do... not what I intend.

This is where most people fail, not because they don't want to change, but because they expect change to be immediate. It's not. You don't rebuild yourself overnight.

You rebuild yourself through small decisions and repeated effort.

By changing behaviors through small actions and reflection, your identity moves from internal to external — moving from intention to action.

The reflection is what keeps you from slipping back.

Confidence doesn't come from thinking differently. It comes from seeing yourself act differently.

The Reality of the Process

You will bounce between all six stages all the time, and often get stuck in loops. The stages are here to help you understand where on the journey you actually are... like a map.

Growth is not a straight line. It's a cycle you move through — again and again — with more awareness each time.

Final Reflection

If you take nothing else from this, take this: You are not stuck because you can't change. You are stuck because you haven't gone through the process fully.

Ask yourself where you are in the cycle right now. If you feel humbled, but have not grieved or recognized your victimhood, then go back. It is OK, and it is not a race.

Ask yourself what you are avoiding or what feels really uncomfortable, as this is place to target.

And then ask yourself what is one small things I can do today that would be different, uncomfortable, or more like the person I want to be... then do it. Not perfectly. Just honestly.