

Getting Motivated to Change a Behavior

Are you or a loved one having a hard time changing a habit, such as smoking or gambling? How about being reluctant to get help for a behavioral health problem, such as depression or anxiety? If you find yourself or someone you care about feeling stuck, you may find some helpful information here to help you understand why it is difficult for many people to change.

Barriers to Behavioral Change

When people do not take steps to change harmful habits or problems they may be perceived by others as resistant, willful, unmotivated, overly pessimistic, in denial, the list goes on and on. It is important to keep in mind that most people want to make changes for the better, but experience actual or perceived barriers that interfere with making behavioral changes.

Examples include:

- Poor understanding about how to change
- Ambivalence (mixed feelings) about changing—sometimes things get worse before they get better. For example, sometimes substance abusers lose relationships with drinking or drug buddies when they become sober
- Lack of key resources to make changes—finances, transportation, child care
- Stigma—concern about what others will think
- Belief in one's capabilities
- Lack of skills needed to change

In fact, a [2004 study published in the New England Journal of Medicine](#) found that service members report unique factors for not seeking mental health services:

- Difficult to access to mental health treatment
- Stigma associated with seeking mental health treatment—concern about how they will be perceived by leadership and peers
- Lack of confidence in mental health treatment

Although some of these concerns are valid, many perceived barriers are fueled by misinformation about mental health problems and treatment. [More](#)

Identify the Problem and Make a Change

Many people have a clear understanding about which behavior(s) they would like to change, such as losing weight, quitting smoking, or eating healthier. Other people lack specific information about their problem(s), but are aware that they are having difficulties because they are experiencing unpleasant symptoms, such as uncomfortable feelings, disturbing thoughts or memories, trouble getting along with others, and the like. Lack of information can interfere with seeking help for the following reasons:

- Failure to recognize the seriousness of the problem—"My symptoms aren't that serious—I don't need professional help."
- Belief that the problem will go away—"I'll just wait it out—things will get better."
- Misconceptions about how problems are treated—"Nothing will help."
- Myths about the impact of getting help—"I'll be perceived as crazy or weak." "It will negatively affect my career."

Step 1: Facing and Understanding the Problem

Getting a clear understanding of your problems and how to change them is an important first step to getting help. Learn more about symptoms you or a loved one may be having:

- [Feeling down, sad, or depressed](#)
- [Stressed out](#)
- [Combat stress, or symptoms that have developed following exposure to combat](#)
- [Deployment-related concerns](#)
- [Alcohol or drug problems](#)
- [Anxiety or feelings of panic](#)
- [Troubled sleep](#)

Step 2: Overcoming Mixed Feelings (Ambivalence)

Many people have mixed feelings about changing. Although positive behavioral changes will lead to long-term benefits, people usually have to make a number of sacrifices in the short run. For instance, an alcoholic who quits drinking will likely have better relationships with his family and friends, but may be giving up a coping strategy for dealing with stress or other problems. It is common for people to have compelling reasons for changing their behavior and not changing their behavior.¹ This ambivalence keeps people stuck, which is why it is important to resolve mixed feelings before making a commitment to a course of action.

One way to overcome ambivalence is to get in touch with your values, meaning who you want to be and how you want to be living. Then, evaluate the discrepancy between your values and how you are actually living. The [Exploring Values Worksheet](#) can help you do this. Here are some important questions to ask yourself or a loved one:

- What is the behavior or issue in question (e.g., substance abuse, depression, exercise, etc.)?
- What makes you think that this is a problem?
- What are the cons, costs, or consequences?
- What are the pros or benefits?
- Why are you considering changing?

You may be familiar with the pros and cons technique to aid decision making. For instance, if you are concerned about your smoking habits write down the “pros” or benefits and the “cons” or costs of quitting smoking.

Consider the pros and cons on all levels:

- Social—What’s the positive or negative impact on family, friends, co-workers?
- Financial—How much is my behavior costing me, and how much will it cost to change?
- Time—How much time do I spend on my habit or behavioral health problem (e.g., time spent gambling or drinking, or time spent in bed because of depression), and how much time will it take to change it (e.g., time reading self-help materials or visiting a physician or mental health provider)?
- Emotional—How does my behavioral health issue positively and negatively impact me (e.g., helps relieve stress or makes me feel miserable), and how would I be affected if I tried to change?

It is useful to evaluate the pros and cons of changing and not changing to help you see all sides of what you might be gaining and giving up. Here is an example of how to evaluate pros and cons:

<u>Quitting Smoking</u>		<u>Not Quitting Smoking</u>	
Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons
Good for health	Feel more stressed	Wouldn't disrupt my life	Spouse will be upset
Save money	Weight gain	Can continue to take smoke breaks at work	Feel bad about self
My family would be happy	Need to find a new way to cope	I won't feel like a failure if I can't quit	My doctor will continue to lecture me
No smoke smell on me,	Too hard to be around	Wouldn't have to suffer	I'll continue to cough

my clothes, my car	other smokers	withdrawal symptoms	and be out of breath
My superiors would be happy to see me make a positive change	Counseling or nicotine replacement costs money		
I'll likely live longer			

Use the [Decisional Balance Worksheet](#) to help evaluate the pros and cons to making a change.

More decision making tools.

- [How to Develop Your Decision-Making Skills](#)
- [Guide to Decision-Making](#)

Step 3: Finding the Resources to Make Changes

People need resources to make necessary changes to get help. Treatment can be expensive, particularly if it is not covered by your insurance. If you do not live near a treatment facility, commuting long distances can be a burden, especially if your family shares one car. Child care can be a problem, particularly during a time of deployment or if you are a single parent. Getting help can be time consuming. Fortunately, many of these problems can be solved.

Finding Help When You Need it

If you do not live near an installation or facility that provides mental health treatment there are other places to get help.

[Find a TRICARE Provider](#) if TRICARE enrolled or insured under TRICARE Reserve Select (TRS), or call 1-888-TRIWEST.

Here are several other resources to help you locate a provider:

- [Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy—Find a Therapist](#) or call 1-212-647-1890.
- [American Psychological Association—Find a Psychologist](#) or call 1-800-964-2000.
- [National Association of Social Workers—Search Clinical Register](#)
- [Locate a Psychiatrist](#) or call 1-888-35-PSYCH. Outside the U.S. and Canada, call 1-703-907-7300.
- [Military Spouse Career Center: Find a Counselor](#)
- [Locate a Vet Center](#)
- [Military OneSource](#) or call Stateside: 1-800-342-9647, Overseas: 800-3429-6477, Overseas Collect: 1-484-530-5908, anytime 24/7.
- Don't forget to investigate local counseling services that may be available through: churches, hospitals, universities or colleges.

Finding Time to Get Help

Some providers offer evening hours. It is not always necessary to see a provider on a weekly basis. For example, it may be possible to meet with a provider monthly. Your primary care doctor may be able to prescribe medications for certain problems, such as sleep, anxiety, or depression. You can discuss these concerns with your physician during your general medical appointment, which could reduce the time away from work and family.

Finding Childcare

There are resources posted on the Military OneSource website to help you [locate childcare](#).

Paying for Treatment

Motivation therapy is not a covered TRICARE benefit on its own, when it is a primary focus of treatment. When the primary condition is a diagnosed mental disorder, e.g., depression, PTSD, or anxiety, treatment for motivation may be covered. TRICARE beneficiaries are eligible for eight behavioral health care visits per year without a referral or pre-authorization. Active duty military personnel always need a referral for care outside a military treatment facility.

If you have other health insurance, check out the behavioral health benefits under the benefit plan and coordinate with your TRICARE benefits:

- [TRICARE behavioral health benefits](#)
- [TRICARE Reserve Select behavioral health benefits](#)
- [Military OneSource](#) or call Stateside: 1-800-342-9647, Overseas: 800-3429-6477, Overseas Collect: 1-484-530-5908, anytime 24/7.

There are also a number of steps you can take on your own to address your problems. Check out the self-help tools offered by this site. Many self-help tools, including some books, can be downloaded free of charge. Some self-help books, such as [Feeling Good](#) by David Burns, M.D. have shown to be effective and are relatively inexpensive to purchase.

Step 4: Dealing with Stigma

Some people are concerned about how others will perceive them if they seek help, particularly from a mental health provider. Although the military has made an effort to reduce stigma associated with mental health services, it still continues to be a barrier for many individuals who need to access treatment. Many service members are concerned that seeking help will negatively impact their careers. However, waiting too long to get help is more likely to negatively impact a career. [Why Marines May Not Seek Help](#) addresses some of the perceived barriers that service members have expressed about seeking mental health treatment. Although this information is written for Marine Corps leaders, the message is relevant for all ranks and branches of military service.

Here are some things to consider:

- You can get help without seeing a mental health specialist:
 - Your primary care doctor may be able to prescribe medications for certain problems, such as sleep, anxiety, or depression. Discuss any concerns with your physician during your general medical appointment.
 - Learn about the self-help opportunities on the TriWest behavioral health portal.
 - Often it is family, friends, or clergy who are the best sources of support.
- Consider the cost-benefit ratio:
 - Typically problems don't just disappear. Although it may be difficult to seek help, your family, friends, professional life, and personal well-being have a greater chance of being impacted negatively if choose to ignore symptoms and do not get professional help.
- Be aware that you're not alone:
 - Sometimes Service members are subjected to traumatic or very stressful events, such as combat. It is normal for people to have reactions to these events that are difficult to cope with.
 - It is important for you to realize that many people seek mental health treatment from professionals every day. For those serving in the military, your mental health reactions are very normal reactions to highly abnormal situations beyond your control.
- Understand the facts about mental health:
 - *Mental health problems are common.* About 22.1 percent of American adults (about 1 in 5) suffer from a diagnosable mental

disorder in a given year [reference: [National Institute of Mental Health](#)].

- There are hundreds of DSM-IV diagnoses of mental disorders. *Some disorders are more serious*, such as schizophrenia, while others less serious, such as a simple phobia.
- *Certain disorders are fairly common*. For example, in a given year about 19.1 million (13.3 %) American adults suffer from an anxiety disorder and 18.8 million (9.5%) suffer from a depressive disorder, whereas only about 2.2 million (1.1%) suffer from schizophrenia [reference: [National Institute of Mental Health](#)].
- A recent survey found that 15.6 to 17.1% of service members met screening criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after duty in Iraq [reference: Hoge, C.W., Castro, C.A., Messer, S.C., McGurk, D., Cotting, D.I., & Koffman, R.L. (2004). Combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, Mental Health Problems, and Barriers to Care. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 351, 13-22.].

Taking control of your physical and mental health care is in your best interest. Doing so demonstrates strength and models positive self care for your family.

Step 5: Believe in Capabilities

People often lack confidence in their ability to change. It's important to ask yourself what makes you think you can achieve your goal. Avoid becoming discouraged by choosing to recall past failures. [Remembering My Successes](#) helps you list positive changes and use the results to build on more success. Implementing a well formed plan for achieving your goals will also improve your self-efficacy—belief in the ability to execute a plan.

The following handouts were specifically designed to help people with substance abuse problems increase their belief in the ability to be successful in staying sober. Many of the principles outlined are relevant to anticipating barriers to success and having an action plan:

- [Evaluating Your Self-Efficacy Regarding Relapse](#)
- [Increasing Your Self-Efficacy](#)

Step 6: Developing the Skills Needed to Change

Sometimes people lack the necessary skills needed to make a behavioral change. You or a loved one may need to work on getting some basic skills in place before tackling a larger issue. There are a number of skills you can learn and practice on your own that will be helpful managing a variety of behavioral health problems:

- [Clear Thinking is Good for Your Health](#)
- [Understand the Importance of Relaxation](#)
- [Pleasant Events: A Daily Practice](#)
- [Communication Skills](#)

The Final Step: Making a Commitment and Sticking to It

Many well-intentioned people fail to make desired behavioral changes because they do not anticipate factors that interfere with reaching goals. It is important to clearly identify *what* change(s) you are willing to make, and *how* you will go about making them. The [Change Plan Worksheet](#) can help you clarify the behavior(s) you want to change, steps needed to make changes, ways others can help, how to know if the plan is working, and what to do if the plan is not working.

It is important that you anticipate worst case scenarios and be prepared to handle them. For instance, a substance abuser should anticipate how to handle urges to use, and what to do in situations where he or she is at high risk for using. Having a plan ahead of time will help you feel more confident in your ability to follow through.

Before diving into the change process, it is important to make a firm commitment about what you will and will not do. Do not commit to more than you can handle—be realistic. For instance, before you agree to exercise everyday for 30-days, make sure it is really doable. Pick a goal that you can successfully reach. Failure to keep your commitments and attain your goals can negatively impact your self- confidence in your ability to change.

Once you have made a commitment and developed a plan, the next step is to implement the change. No matter how committed you are it can be difficult to stay the course. For instance, change can be harder than you anticipated, barriers that you did not anticipate can interfere with your progress, or it may take you longer to feel better or see improvement than you had hoped. [Looking Forward](#) poses some questions about the kind of life you want to create. Use this strategy to help you hang on when you feel like giving up. [Relapse Prevention](#) handouts cover a broad range of topics developed specifically for individuals concerned with a substance abuse

relapse. This web resource provides many useful suggestions to help you stay on track and meet your behavioral health goals.

It is important to keep in mind that people experience ups and downs during the change process. Learn from a relapse or getting off track, and move on.

General Tips for Family Members

1. How do I help my loved one understand the importance of addressing his or her problem?

<i><u>Less Helpful</u></i>	<i><u>More Helpful</u></i>
Threatening, arguing or being critical is not helpful to someone who is struggling with a motivation problem. While it is difficult to see someone you love engaging in behaviors or habits that are harmful to them, the individual experiencing the problem must decide to change and then take action.	Help a loved one identify his or her values, and compare them to the way that he or she is actually living. Acknowledge that many people can be ambivalent about changing. It is helpful to listen carefully to what your loved one is saying and repeat back what you heard to demonstrate that you understand, even if you do not agree. More

2. How do I help my loved one commit to change?

<i><u>Less Helpful</u></i>	<i><u>More Helpful</u></i>
If a loved one is showing signs of thinking about a change, it is not useful to push for a promise to change. Before asking for a commitment, it is important to identify his or her readiness for change. How to Develop Your Decision Making Skills outlines the stages that a person moves through in order to effect a change in behavior.	If a loved one is “on the fence” about change, communicate that it is OK to have mixed feelings, and be open to talking about pros and cons of change. Help him or her identify their values. Help them identify the cons, costs, or consequences? What are the pros or benefits? Why consider a change? Using empathic listening skills may help a loved one feel understood, and may lead to resolving ambivalent feelings.
It is not helpful to criticize an overweight partner because he or she is not following a work out schedule that you think they	Help your loved one make realistic commitments. For example, if working out 5-days a week is not doable, try 3-days a week and

should be following. Forcing someone to commit to something that they are not likely or able to do will lead to a decreased belief in the ability to be successful.	build on success. Encourage small steps and work up to larger goals. Let them know that you are confident in their ability to succeed.
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3. How can I help my loved one be successful?

<i><u>Less Helpful</u></i>	<i><u>More Helpful</u></i>
Do not take control of a situation by telling someone what you are going to do to ensure their success, or by telling them what they must do. People can be put off by this take charge attitude and may be less willing to collaborate with you.	Some people prefer instrumental types of support, such as watching the children or giving them a ride. Others prefer emotional support, like listening. Ask what you can do to be supportive.
In general, people tend to avoid individuals who are critical and punishing. Criticism alone does not help increase more effective behavior. "You're doing it wrong!" is not helpful instruction for helping someone understand how to do it right.	Recognize progress, even small gains, and comment favorably about changes. If a loved one is struggling, offer help and let them know you support their effort.

4. What if my loved one relapses or stops making progress?

<i><u>Less Helpful</u></i>	<i><u>More Helpful</u></i>
When people are not making progress with changing a behavior, statements like, "You just need to try harder", "You don't really want it", or "You just need to believe in yourself" are not helpful. Remember, there are a number of factors that can interfere with progress.	Assure your loved one that they have not failed, only experienced a set back. Acknowledge that change is difficult. Help your loved one identify actual and perceived barriers that may be interfering with progress. Help problem solve barriers and develop a plan for success.