How Individuals can change

All individuals have the capacity for change and most people will change as a result of the natural proves of maturity. As we go through our lives we enter several stages of development, as we go though these stages we naturally change the way we think and act. Individuals also learn a great deal along the way to maturity. Through trial and error we can find things that work better, that make our lives a little easier if we do things just a little different. We learn from our mistakes and we grow as individuals toward making better decisions. Through out our lives we will be faced with many life altering decisions and as we are and have more experience we can make better choices.

For many of us there is at least one bad habit or aspect of our behavior that we would like to change. For some it is a small thing such as to be able to get up on time instead of hitting the snooze button, for others there is a more severe problem such as substance abuse. Unfortunately as most people who have tried to make such a change in their lives can tell you, it is not an easy thing to do. I know from personal experience that just having the desire to change is not enough. We tend to get stuck in our way of doing things even if they are unhealthy and undesirable. We often lack a significant amount of motivation to be able to make such changes.

There are several theories about how individuals change their behavior and learn new ways of behaving in their social environment. One of these ways is through behavior modification or operant conditioning. In behavior modification we must break down the new behavior in integral steps. One step at a time, first making a small step toward the goal behavior for a short period of time and then rewarding it when the small stop to the goal has been completed within this short time period. Then slowly you increase the amount of the activity and the amount of time that you will behave, or refrain from behaving in a certain way, and then reward this when the time or amount of activity is done. The rewards are called positive reinforcements. These reinforcements should fir the behavior that you are trying to change. For example if you are trying to not bite your fingernails you should make this a goal for 5 days and then reward yourself if you do not bite your fingernails. The reward if you are female could be to buy a new color of fingernail polish. In the long term after you increase the amount of time and you go for an entire month with out biting you fingernails you can reward yourself with a manicure. Behavior modification works on the theory that consequences or rewards can motivate individuals to change their behavior.

Another theory, social learning or cognitive theory, suggests that change in behavior is determined by the environmental influences that surround us. The theory centers on the premise that individuals must believe that they can accomplish the change, Cognitive theory refers to this belief that an individual can change as self-efficacy. Cognitive theory suggests that a person must value the outcomes of the change in behavior and must believe that the change is worth the work to change the behavior. This theory stresses that individuals can increase the self-efficacy of a persons want to change by training in the skills needed for the change and also seeing the new behavior modeled in some way by others. The person modeling the behavior must be a person that can get others to want to be like them. They must be respected by the observers and also have some connection with the person trying to change. The individual trying to make a change must believe that they can and want to be like the person who is modeling the
behavior. Cognitive theory works on the belief that people change as a result of observing other in their environment and how they act.

The ecological or systems approach suggests that not only do you need to pay attention to the individuals and the desired change but you must look at the other systems within the environment that can influence the behavior. This theory emphasizes that you not only need to pay attention to giving the individual the skill and motivation in order to change their behavior, but you need to set up support systems to allow the behavior change to become permanent. You must support the change in the environment in which the person lives. All these factors work simultaneously on the individual to either encourage or discourage the behavior of the individuals within it. This theory works on the premise that you must look at the bigger picture. You must look to see what barriers are in place that prevents the person from making a desired change.

These are only a few of the theories on how individuals can change a target behavior. There are many more theories out there that help fill in the gaps of the theories listed above. There are many places that a person can turn to for help if there are situations where a serious changes if needed. There are mental health units, chemical dependency treatment programs, detention facilities and out patient therapy that can help if there is a severe problem that needs intervention right away. In the cases of substance abuse and also with mental illness there is also the choice of medication that can help facilitate a change in individual behavior or at least make the change less physically dangerous and more likely to be sustained.

In summary it appears that there are many factors that help individuals to change their behavior. Sometimes people get to the point where they know a change is needed and can seek help on their own. Many times people are required to seek a change their behavior due to come intervention by a change agent. Either want there are many resources for those who are motivated to make a change. It is important that we as social workers know where these resources are and hot to access them, but the bottom line is that an individual must want to change in order for any change to take place. The individual must be at a place in their livers were they can be motivated to take the necessary steps toward making a needed change, they must learn how to make the change and they must be able to maintain the change in the environment that they are going to be residing in after the intervention. If there are no safety nets set up for individuals who have made a significant change in their lives, they will most likely be unable to sustain the new behavior and they will relapse or continue on with their old undesirable behaviors.

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