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What is the main purpose of writing a behavior-change contract

The transtheoretical model of behavior change, developed by Prochaska and DiClemente, assesses an individual's readiness to implement a healthier behavior, and provides insight into the decision making process that leads to action. For many people, changing or modifying a behavior that is unhealthy or potentially harmful can be quite challenging. Here are the stages that lead to behavior change: Precontemplation (Not Ready) - You are not intending to take action in the foreseeable future, and can be unaware that your behavior is problematic. Contemplation (Getting Ready) - You are beginning to recognize that your behavior is problematic, and start to look at the pros and cons of your continued actions. Preparation (Ready) - You are intending to take action in the immediate future, and may begin taking small steps toward behavior change. Action - You are making actual changes to your problem behavior by incorporating healthy choices/behaviors into your life. Maintenance - You have been able to sustain action for at least six months and are working to prevent relapse into previous unhealthy behaviors. Check out this supplemental video to review the main concepts of the Transtheoretical Model: SMART Goal Setting. Have you ever said to yourself that you need to "eat healthier" or "exercise more" to improve your overall health? How well did that work for you? In most cases, probably not very well. That's because these statements are too vague and do not give us any direction for what truly needs to be done to achieve such goals. To have a better chance at being successful, try using the SMART acronym for setting your goals (S= Specific, M= Measurable, A=Attainable, R= Realistic, T= Time-oriented): Specific - Create a goal that has a focused and clear path for what you actually need to do. Examples: I will drink 8 ounces of water 3 times per day I will walk briskly for 30 minutes, 5 times per week I will reduce my soda intake to no more than 2 cans of soda per week. Do you see how that is more helpful than just saying you will eat healthier or exercise more? It gives you direction. Measurable - This enables you to track your progress, and ties in with the "specific" component. The above examples all have actual numbers associated with the behavior change that let you know whether or not it has been met. Attainable - Make sure that your goal is within your capabilities and not too far out of reach. For example, if you have not been physically active for a number of years, it would be highly unlikely that you would be able to achieve a goal of running a marathon within the next month. Realistic - Try to ensure that your goal is something you will be able to continue doing and incorporate as part of your regular routine/lifestyle. For example, if you made a goal to kayak 2 times each week, but don't have the financial resources to purchase or rent the equipment, no way to transport it, or are not close enough to a body of water in which to partake in kayaking, then this is not going to be feasible. Time-oriented - Give yourself a target date or deadline in which the goal needs to be met. This will keep you on track and motivated to reach the goal, while also evaluating your progress. The behavior contract is a simple positive-reinforcement intervention that is widely used by teachers to change student behavior. The behavior contract spells out in detail the expectations of student and teacher (and sometimes parents) in carrying out the intervention plan, making it a useful planning document. Also, because the student usually has input into the conditions that are established within the contract for earning rewards, the student is more likely to be motivated to abide by the terms of the behavior contract than if those terms had been imposed by someone else. (NOTE: View a sample behavior contract as an attachment at the bottom of this page.) Steps in Implementing This Intervention The teacher decides which specific behaviors to select for the behavior contract. When possible, teachers should define behavior targets for the contract in the form of positive, pro-academic or pro-social behaviors. For example, an instructor may be concerned that a student frequently calls out answers during lecture periods without first getting permission from the teacher to speak. For the contract, the teacher's concern that the student talks out may be restated positively as "The student will participate in class lecture and discussion, raising his hand and being recognized by the teacher before offering an answer or comment." In many instances, the student can take part in selecting positive goals to increase the child's involvement in, and motivation toward, the behavioral contract. The teacher meets with the student to draw up a behavior contract. (If appropriate, other school staff members and perhaps the student's parent(s) are invited to participate as well.) The teacher next meets with the student to draw up a behavior contract. The contract should include: a listing of student behaviors that are to be reduced or increased. As stated above, the student's behavioral goals should usually be stated in positive, goal-oriented terms. Also, behavioral definitions should be described in sufficient detail to prevent disagreement about student compliance. The teacher should also select target behaviors that are easy to observe and verify. For instance completion of class assignments is a behavioral goal that can be readily evaluated. If the teacher selects the goal that a child "will not steal pens from other students", though, this goal will be very difficult to observe and confirm. a statement or section that explains the minimum conditions under which the student will earn a point, sticker, or other token for showing appropriate behaviors. For example, a contract may state that "Johnny will add a point to his Good Behavior Chart each time he arrives at school on time and hands in his completed homework assignment to the teacher." the conditions under which the student will be able to redeem collected stickers, points, or other tokens to redeem for specific rewards. A contract may state, for instance, that "When Johnny has earned 5 points on his Good Behavior Chart, he may select a friend, choose a game from the play-materials shelf, and spend 10 minutes during free time at the end of the day playing the game." bonus and penalty clauses (optional). Although not required, bonus and penalty clauses can provide extra incentives for the student to follow the contract. A bonus clause usually offers the student some type of additional "pay-off" for consistently reaching behavioral targets. A penalty clause may prescribe a penalty for serious problem behaviors; e.g., the student disrupts the class or endangers the safety of self or of others, areas for signature. The behavior contract should include spaces for both teacher and student signatures, as a sign that both parties agree to adhere to their responsibilities in the contract. Additionally, the instructor may want to include signature blocks for other staff members (e.g., a school administrator) and/or the student's parent(s). Troubleshooting: How to Deal With Common Problems in Using Behavior Contracts Q: What do I do if I find that the behavior contract fails to work? There may be several possible explanations why a behavior contract is ineffective: Students may not be invested in abiding by the terms of the contract because they did not have a significant role in its creation. If this is the case, students should be consulted and their input should be incorporated into a revised contract. The rewards that can be earned through the contract may not sufficiently motivate students to cause them to change their behavior. The teacher should review the list of rewards with students, note those rewards that students indicate they would find most appealing, and revise the reward list to include choices selected by the students. Points and rewards may not be awarded frequently enough to motivate the student. Each person reacts in his or her own way to reward systems such as behavior contracts; some must have rewards delivered at a frequent rate in order for those rewards to have power sufficient to shape these students' behavior. The instructor can try altering the contract to increase the rate at which points and rewards are given to see if these changes increase student motivation to follow the behavior contract. (NOTE: Once the behavior contract proves effective, the teacher can gradually cut back the rate of rewards to a level that is more easily managed.) Q: How do I respond if the student starts to argue with me about the terms of the contract? It is not unusual—especially when a behavior contract is first introduced—for the teacher and student to have honest disagreements about the interpretation of its terms. If this occurs, the teacher will probably want to have a conference with the student to clarify the contract's language and meaning. Occasionally, though, students may continue to argue with the instructor about alleged unfairness in how the teacher enforces the contract—even after the teacher has attempted to clarify the contract's terms. If the student becomes overly antagonistic, the teacher may simply decide to suspend the contract because it is not improving the student's behavior. Or the instructor may instead add a behavioral goal or penalty clause to the contract that the student will not argue with the teacher about the terms or enforcement of the contract. Attachments Behavior contracts can be useful when the student has behavioral problems in school locations other than the classroom (e.g., art room, cafeteria). Once a behavior contract has proven effective in the classroom, the instructor can meet with the student to extend the terms of the contract across multiple settings. Adults in these other school locations would then be responsible for rating the student's behaviors during the time that the student is with them. For example, a goal may be stated in the contract that a student "will participate in class activities, raising his hand, and being recognized by the classroom or specials teacher before offering an answer or comment." Art, gym, or library instructors would then rate the student's behaviors in these out-of-class settings and share these ratings with the classroom teacher.



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