



**MONASH**  
CLIMATE CHANGE  
COMMUNICATION  
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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH HUB**  
**SUPPORTING CLIMATE-FRIENDLY  
BEHAVIOUR CHANGE**

This fact sheet provides an introduction to one of the latest models for understanding what influences behaviour change, and explains how this model can help climate change campaigners support individuals to adopt new behaviours.

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## THE STAGES OF CHANGE



Human behaviour is complex and influenced by so many internal and external factors that make it difficult to predict. Psychological researchers have been investigating this topic for decades, and we know that there are some common trends that can help us understand why people do or don't undertake certain behaviours. Turning this into an understanding of how to affect behaviour, is yet another layer in human complexity.

*The Staged Model of Self-regulated Behavioural Change* (referred to as 'the model' for the rest of this fact sheet and illustrated in figure 1) was developed by German researcher Sebastian Bamberg, and brings together a range of older theories of behaviour in a way that explains the process of change. The model is appropriate for behaviours where the individual has a sufficient level of control and access to the necessary resources and infrastructure—these are known as self-regulated behaviours.

The model has four stages. The pre-decision stage begins before the individual is even aware that there is a problem, and ends when they have a general goal to help address the issue—a goal intention.

The pre-action stage is the period after forming a goal intention and ends when the individual has decided which behaviour they'd like to do to help—a behavioural intention.

The action stage is the period after developing a behavioural intention, where the individual is working out exactly how they will do and maintain that behaviour—an implementation intention.

The post-action stage starts when the behaviour has begun, and continues until the behaviour has become a strong habit.

People often don't progress through these stages in a nice linear way, but rather move up and down through the stages as they learn more about themselves, the problem, and the behaviour options, and as they discover what behaviours work for them, and how. People can also become stuck within a stage without progressing to the next.

**THE STAGES OF CHANGE**  
 ENCOURAGING EACH STAGE  
 TIMES OF CHANGE

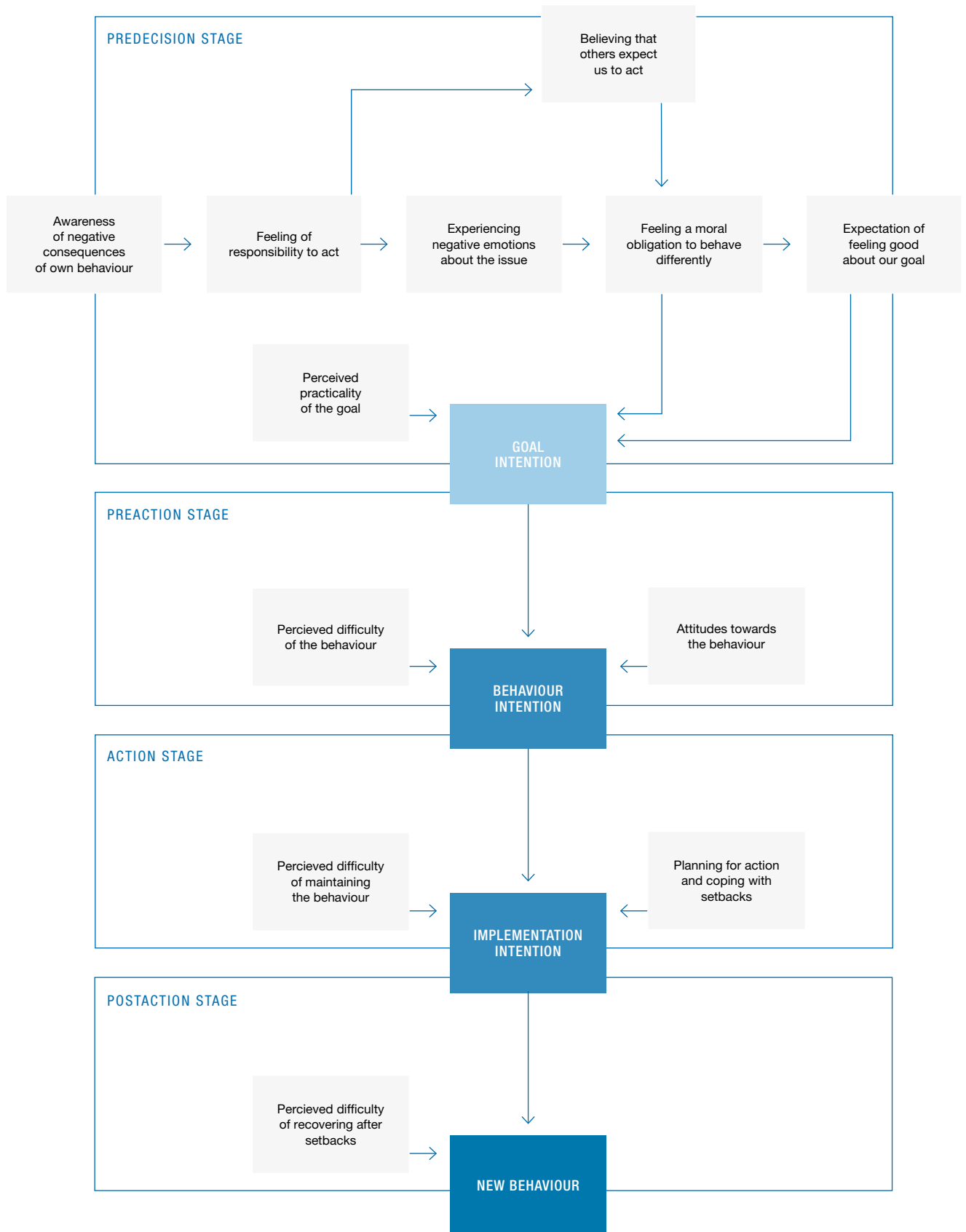


FIGURE 1: THE STAGED MODEL OF SELF-REGULATED BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE (SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM BAMBERG 2013)

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## ENCOURAGING EACH STAGE

Each stage has specific factors that contribute to progress through the stage, and these factors are associated with specific information needs and motivators. Organisations wishing to encourage and support people to progress to the next stage can provide messages tailored to the specific stage.

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### Messages for the pre-decision stage

People in the pre-decision stage are not aware that their behaviour is contributing to a problem, and may not even be aware that the problem exists. They do this behaviour on a regular (maybe even habitual) basis, and may react defensively if confronted about the behaviour or direct requests to change their actions.

The goal of messages for people in this stage is for the individual to form a goal intention such as: “In the next few weeks, I will use my car less”.

Messages to people in this stage should help them answer the question: ‘Why should I change my behaviour?’

Messages should focus on:

- raising awareness of the problem and their own role in it
- people’s sense of doing the right thing—reminding them of their own beliefs about what’s right, and also that others expect it of them
- encouraging people to set goals and enhancing goal commitment
- linking people with various social supports relevant to the targeted goals or issue

Some cautions are important for this stage. Societal issues, such as climate change, that require broadscale behaviour change can be highly politicised and trigger defensive attitudes if raised too directly for some audiences. Understanding your audience is particularly critical for this stage, and a few key strategies can help:

- Consider whether or not the problem of your focus is the only issue associated with the desired behaviour, and whether or not it needs to be specifically mentioned
- Raise awareness of how the problem is affecting the person’s local community—while still connecting in to the bigger issue
- Highlight how action will benefit the wider community rather than just the individual

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### Messages for the pre-action stage

People in the pre-action stage have decided that they want to change their behaviour, but have not yet decided how to do so. The decision typically considers their attitudes to each behaviour option and how difficult they believe it is. Once they've balanced (consciously or unconsciously) these out across their options, they pick the behaviour they perceive has the best attitude-difficulty balance.

The goal of messages for people in this stage is for the individual to form a behavioural intention such as: "In the next few weeks, I will use my bicycle instead of my car to get to work".

Messages to people in this stage should help them answer the question: "Which action should I take?"

Messages should focus on:

- the positives and negatives of the different alternative behaviours, including how much they will help the problem, as well as how easy or difficult they are to implement and the required resources etc.
- promoting feelings of control over one's own behaviour
- linking people with various social supports relevant to the specific behaviour options they might choose to implement

Some cautions are important for this stage. No matter the target issue, it is important to recognise that no single behaviour will be suitable for all people or all situations. Providing the above positives and negatives for diverse behaviour options allows people to identify which behaviours will provide the most help in addressing the problem but still suit their own situation.

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### Messages for the action stage

People in the action stage have strong goal and behavioural intentions, but have not yet put a plan in place for actually implementing the behaviour. To be successful, such a plan needs to include the when, where, and how of actually doing the action.

The goal of messages for people in this stage is for the individual to form an implementation intention such as: 'Tomorrow morning I will ride to work at 7 am using the Djerring Trail cycle path'.

Messages to people in this stage should help them answer the question: 'how, when and where will I actually do this action?'

Messages should focus on:

- encouraging people to set very specific plans for their chosen behaviour
- helping people identify, and plan for, the likely challenges that might prevent them implementing their chosen behaviour
- linking people with social supports relevant to the specific behaviour they are planning to implement

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### Messages for the post-action stage

People in the post-action stage have begun to implement their new behaviour, but they will face challenges and setbacks that can make them slip back into old habits.

The goal of messages for people in this stage is to help the individual to keep up the behaviour in the face of setbacks, until it forms a new habit. The ability of individuals to return to the behaviour after a relapse into old behaviours is the main predictor of success in making it a new habit.

Messages should focus on:

- where possible, providing feedback on the behaviour to help people track their progress
- providing tips and tools to help maintain the behaviour and prevent the temptation to relapse
- linking people with social supports relevant to the specific behaviour they are implementing

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## TIMES OF CHANGE

As circumstances change, individuals face a range of upsets that can make certain behaviours more or less difficult. This might include moving house, starting a new job, birth of a child, retirement, etc. These times of change offer valuable opportunities for breaking old habits and replacing them with new, and can shift the individual back to the preaction or even predecisional phase without conscious realisation.

Messaging at these times can be highly beneficial for preventing relapse and for helping individuals identify and adopt beneficial new behaviours where old ones are no longer practical.

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#### Reference

Bamberg, S 2013, 'Changing environmentally harmful behaviours: A stage model of self-regulated behavioural change', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 34, pp. 151–159.

#### Cover image

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<https://unsplash.com/photos/hJyTlbPJfts>