

Building Skills, Self-Efficacy, and Intentions in Behavior Change Interventions

August 2021

Lori A. Roller, MSW, MPH
lorirolleri@gmail.com

Behavior change, or applying skills in real life, requires a progression through several learning stages. The stages (described below) are informed by behavior-change theories and approaches such as social cognitive theory, theory of planned behavior, cognitive-dissonance, brain-based learning principles, and adult learning principles.

1. **Establish Positive Attitudes and Beliefs about the Behavior.** First, build motivation for learning and using the skill. Engage learners in identifying the benefits of using the skill and how it will improve their situation, relationship, wellbeing, health, etc. Learning activities like personal assessments or individual reflection, analysis of case studies or stories, and activities where learners have to "debate" a point of view, are examples of activities that work well to change attitudes and beliefs.
2. **Describe the Skill (knowledge).** Second, describe the skill and break it down into easy-to-understand "chunks" or steps. Do your best to limit these steps to seven or less, as most learners have difficulty remembering more than seven points, concepts, tips, etc. The facilitator can elicit these steps first from the learner by drawing upon their real-life experiences, and then add or edit steps as appropriate, or simply present the list of skill steps.

Ill-advised steps offered by learners should not be kept on the list of skill steps. The facilitator should explain why the step is not supportive of the skill and then remove it.

3. **Model the Skill (observational learning).** Third, the facilitator models the skill to the best of their ability for learners. Then the facilitator (or a learner) leads a debrief discussion on what the learners observed and how their observations link to the skill steps just described. There is no need for the facilitator to model the "bad" use of the skill. Debrief questions might include:

- What skill steps did you see me use?
- How well do you think I practiced these steps? Was there anything you think I could have done better?
- How important do you think it is that I use all the steps?
- What would it be like for you to use this skill in real life?

4. **Provide Skill Practice Opportunities and Build Self-Efficacy.** Fourth, allow participants to practice the skill—from easy scenarios to more complex. This is also the stage where the learner builds self-efficacy.

If you start with a practice scenario that is too difficult, and the learner doesn't succeed, they are more likely to lose interest or give up. Mastery of the skill occurs when the learner succeeds little by little. One way to do this is to start by practicing a fully scripted role play where learners can easily identify the skill steps; by doing so they will have the opportunity to become familiar with how the skill steps look/sound when applied to a realistic scenario.

Then provide a partially scripted role play (a little more challenging), and then an open role play (more challenging), and then an open role play where the circumstances are more complex (most challenging). Too often, behavior change curricula start with open role plays without explaining how to “perform” the skill. This is not best practice.

There should also be multiple practice opportunities. One 5-minute practice opportunity is unlikely to build self-efficacy for any skill.

Design skill practice opportunities so that peers are observing each other in small groups and/or in large group presentations. By doing so, the **perception of peer norms** supporting the use of the skill increases.

5. **Provide Positive and Constructive Feedback and Build the Learner's External and Internal Rewards.** Fifth, provide learners with opportunities for positive and constructive feedback from the facilitator and/or from their peers. This is often achieved by objective observers using an observation form that lists the skills steps and other characteristics that indicate effective use of the skill (e.g., supportive body language). Again, when the skill is broken down into steps, and the learner can achieve mastery bit by bit, they are more likely to have success.

The external positive reinforcement that comes from observers is motivating and rewarding, and so is the internal motivation/reward from personally experiencing success. Internal reward will also occur when the learner uses the skill in real life and experiences a positive outcome.

6. **Build Intentions.** The last stage is supporting the learner in setting intentions to use the skill in real life. These steps in this stage are listed below.
 1. State the intention to use the skill in front of others or in writing (the what, the when, the where, the why)
 2. Create a plan to use the skill. Name the steps (the how).

3. Identify possible barriers to using the skill and problem-solve around these barriers.
4. Identify the supports that will help you realize your intentions.
5. Commit to using the skill (e.g., oral commitment in front of a peer(s), signing a pledge or contract, writing a promise letter to self).
6. Monitor and evaluate progress; make adjustments as needed.
7. Celebrate successes.

Behavior Change Planning Template

Link Skills to the Behavior Change Goal

1. What is the behavior you want to change?
2. What skills are required to realize this behavior change?

Stage 1: Establish Positive Attitudes and Beliefs about the Behavior.

3. Select one of the skills. Why should learners be excited about learning this skill? What benefit can they expect to experience? What's in it for them?

Stage 2: Describe the Skill

4. Break down the skill in easy-to-understand steps.

Stage 3: Model the Skill

5. What scenario can you use to model the skill for learners? Write the scripts for modeling the skill.
6. What questions do you want to ask the learners in a debrief discussion after your demonstration?

Stage 4: Provide Skill Practice Opportunities and Build Self-Efficacy

7. How will you design a simple skill practice opportunity?
8. One that is a little more challenging?
9. One that is complex?

Stage 5: Provide Positive and Constructive Feedback and Build the Learner's External and Internal Rewards.

10. How will you be sure the learners received positive and constructive feedback on their modeling of the skill?

Stage 6: Build Intentions

11. How will you create an opportunity for learners to plan and commit to using the new skill?

The author welcomes comments and suggestions:
lorirolleri@gmail.com