

## **Stages of Readiness for Change in Anorexia Nervosa**

### **Why is it useful to think about readiness for change?**

Recognising the stage the person you are trying to help is at, is important for empathy, emotional attunement and connection. However it is also important for setting realistic expectations among those trying to help that person change, to be able to accept that your efforts to help may be resisted or may take a long time to be of benefit. You often need to 'play the long game' to support and nurture a process of change. Acceptance of this can reduce burn-out in clinicians and carers alike.

For example:

- pushing someone to make changes who really feels their AN is helping them, is going to be met with resistance, and may be experienced as intrusive, controlling or threatening.
- Yet the same approach in someone in who is at the stage of recognising the negatives of AN and is genuinely committed to change but struggling, may be welcomed and experienced as supportive.

### **Dictatorship Analogy**

An analogy of a state with a repressive dictatorship can be used as a way of understanding how the illness of AN functions psychologically and why it can be so difficult to escape from. This analogy can then be used to describe the stage of readiness for change.

Like a dictatorship in a society, the AN dictator emerges when it feels like things are 'out of control', unstable, threatening or dangerous in some way. These vulnerable feelings reflect a *Vulnerable Mode*. Typically in adolescence when there is so much challenge and change both physically and socially, people experience more uncertainty which can feel very threatening to some.

The AN dictator provides a simple solution - follow some rules do what you are told, and everything will feel more in control and safer. This is the *Over-controller mode* that tries to achieve perfect control. The internal 'dictator' can become almost like an internal parent that



establishes rules to protect them from perceived dangers (like becoming overweight) and which can guide them to do the 'right' thing when they feel vulnerable, uncertain or confused.

Initially it feels like a benign dictatorship, that helps them feel safer and is therefore rewarding. Things do feel more in control and being a 'good citizen' of the dictatorship (controlling their weight etc.) makes them feel they are getting things 'right' and a sense of achievement and self-worth. So there is a reward even a buzz of being an admirable member of society who is working hard. If anyone challenges the way of life of the dictatorship they are working so hard to adhere to, there may be an angry rejecting response (*Angry Over-protector*) to those people, as they are seen as a threat to the sense of safety they are experiencing as a loyal comrade of the dictatorship.

Unfortunately the sense of control only persists if they continue to stick with impossibly rigid rules, like losing weight every week. Over time, the rules get more rigid and difficult to get 'right', and there is more fear of getting things 'wrong'. Life gets more and more limited and uninteresting as the risk of making mistakes, being 'denounced' and getting severely punished by the 'secret police' (*Self-Critical mode*), feels too high.

So it becomes less frightening just to avoid everyone else, not draw any attention to yourself and just stay at home most of the time, submitting to the rules (*Detached-Avoidant Mode*). Over time resentment at this isolated, punishing and harsh existence, can lead to anger and frustration spilling out (*Angry over-protector mode*) in the hope that something might change in society to make it less harsh and frightening, but this often leads to shame about being angry and a return to sticking to the rules and keeping their head below the parapet.

### **Stage 1: The Loyal Anorexic**

In this stage there is a determined commitment to the value of AN, especially to the value of over-control (and the self-criticism that leads to this) and of weight loss as the key mechanism for controlling vulnerable feelings and fears.

There is an experience of short-term reward including: a sense of achievement; reduced anxiety or emotional numbness, during weight loss especially. Those trying to encourage change are usually seen as a



threat to their feeling of safety, their way of life, even their identity. At best as misguided but well-meaning, at worst, as 'the enemy'.

Absolute denial, stubborn resistance or active fighting against others often characterises this phase.

### **Stage 2: The Desperate Defector**

Vulnerability is intense and persistent, despite extreme commitment to self-control, self-denial, emotional detachment from others and complete self-reliance.

So like a desperate defector who starts to feel they may need to escape from a repressive regime, change is contemplated. However they are very afraid of the uncertainty of living as a free person, and are fearful of how 'refugee's' from the dictatorship may be viewed and treated in the 'free state'. The longer they've lived under the dictatorship the harder it is to imagine living any other way, or that people would accept them if they were different.

They often have little belief that they can change, so may try small changes but quickly retreat into what feels normal for them. They are terrified of the 'backlash' from their self-critical mode, and how bad and overwhelmed this will make them feel.

### **Stage 3: The Ambivalent Conscript**

There is an awareness of the costs of their illness but lots of fear about change and being 'recruited' to be kind and caring to themselves. Unsure if they can trust others in the 'free state' who are encouraging defection and change.

They fear the prospects of recovery and all the expectations that come with being 'healthy' and having to make their way in the world of the 'free state', fearing that they will fail. They are afraid of trying to change or recover, failing to do so and being left feeling unprotected, exposed and overwhelmed with vulnerable feelings.

Yet despite their fears, they have 'signed up' and are preparing for change. They may only be able to hold onto a healthy change mode when they are supported by others who they trust. They may flip between some engagement in change and needing others to hold all the hope for them.

### **Stage 4: The Freedom Fighter Stage**

Enough of a healthy mode exists to recognise, intellectually and at an emotional level, the negatives of the illness and maintain a consistent desire to change or recover.



Yet they find themselves in a constant hour by hour emotional battle between their healthy mode and their maladaptive modes in every decision they make.

Some patients may make significant changes in a short period, but then feel overwhelmed with anxiety and go backwards, sometimes with significant set-backs before being able to move forward again.

The key is learning to 'struggle successfully', through having set-backs or feeling very vulnerable when trying to do things differently, but accepting this is a part of learning to be fallible and not reverting to severe self-criticism and over-control.