Stages of Change: You Can't Push a Rope

Keep this. It's the whole course in writing: where the stages of change came from, what each one tends to sound like, the urge to fix and what it does to a conversation, change talk and the other kind, the three small moves when you hear it, two tracks for the person who's pulling others away from change, and the one question to ask before sharing your own story. The reading at the start is part of the two hours, and both tests ask about it.

Quick thing before you start. Probably a good idea to check your own agency's ethics and boundaries first. Makes sense, right? What's here is general peer support, from a fictional agency. Your agency's policies, your supervisor and Ohio's rules come first, every time. Peer support is not treatment, and nothing here is a diagnosis or a clinical technique.

How the two hours are built

The reading, *You Can't Push a Rope* (this handout)	**20 min**
The course guide, both halves (this handout)	**20 min**
Video part one: where are they?	**17 min**
Your call: three scenarios · Test one: 15 questions, 12 to pass	**20 min**
Break	**5 min**
Video part two: what are they saying?	**12 min**
Your call: three scenarios · Test two: 15 questions, 12 to pass	**20 min**
Course evaluation	**3 min**
Your certificate, and putting it in My CEUs	**2 min**
Total designed time	**about 2 hours**

Designed time is the course read and done the way it's laid out. How fast you move through it is up to you. Both tests have to be passed for the two-hour certificate. The passing score is this course's own setting, not an Ohio requirement.

The reading · You Can't Push a Rope

About 20 minutes. Where the model came from, what it says, and how a peer supporter might use it without turning it into a lecture. Read it before part one; the tests ask about it.

Where the stages came from

In the early 1980s, two psychologists, James Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente, were studying how people quit smoking. What they noticed was that people didn't usually change all at once. They seemed to move through recognizable stages, sometimes forward, sometimes back, and sometimes staying put for a long while. Their transtheoretical model, better known as the stages of change, has been part of addiction treatment ever since. SAMHSA built much of TIP 35, *Enhancing Motivation for Change in Substance Use Disorder Treatment*, around it.

Around the same time, William Miller, and later Stephen Rollnick, were developing motivational interviewing: a way of talking with people about change that starts from where they are instead of where we'd like them to be. A lot of the language in this course (the righting reflex, change talk, reflections, developing discrepancy) comes from their work.

Two things about all this matter for peer supporters. First, none of it is ours to deliver as treatment. The counselors and clinicians at your agency have their own training in it. What we can take from it is a way of listening. Second, the model was built from watching real people change in real time, which is the same thing we get to do every day. It puts words to what most of us have already noticed.

The five stages, and what each one tends to sound like

Stage	Where the person is	Sounds like	What the crew has found helps
Precontemplation	Changing isn't on their mind. From where they sit, things may not look the way they look to us.	"I don't have a problem. My PO has a problem."	Get curious about something they actually want, and take it seriously. Skip the lecture.
Contemplation	Two things true at once. Part of them sees reasons to change, part isn't sure.	"Yeah, I've thought about it, but..."	Make room for both sides, in their words. Don't pick a winner.
Preparation	Something's shifting. They're thinking about how a change might actually happen.	"Is there a meeting near my job?"	Answer the question they asked. Let the plan be theirs.

Action	Day-to-day life is changing: routines, places, people.	"Ninety days today. I still can't believe it."	Notice the work it takes, not just the number.
Maintenance	They've figured out what helps and what makes things harder, and they're keeping it going.	"Two years. I go to the Tuesday meeting whether I need it or not."	It's not always exciting to watch. There's a lot going on there.

Recurrence. Change doesn't always move in one direction. TIP 35 also describes recurrence, when somebody returns to an earlier pattern. The model makes room for it without treating it like the end of the story. A return to use is information: what was happening, what got difficult, what support might have been missing. Some of us know that part firsthand.

Different stages about different things. Taco's line: a person can be in different stages about different parts of their life. Earl might not be interested in changing his drinking, and he might be thinking hard about seeing his grandkids again. Nobody is in a stage about their whole life. That's worth remembering before we decide where somebody "is."

The righting reflex

Miller and Rollnick gave a name to the feeling most of us know well: we see a problem, and we want to help somebody fix it, right now, with the truth. They called it the righting reflex. It comes from a good place. The tricky part is what it does to a conversation. When we start making the argument for change, the other person tends to start making the argument for staying the same. Now we're both talking, and nobody's exploring much. That's what happened to Dom on the porch with Mateo, and it's the moment this course is named for. You can't push a rope. You can pick up your end and see where it leads.

Taco's version: "Sometimes people already have their own questions about what's going on. When I jump in with my answers, there isn't much room left for them to talk about those questions." What helped him was getting comfortable with not having the answer right away. Get curious, listen, maybe ask a question. Make room for somebody to wonder out loud.

Response starters

Examples of how the H.E.L.P. crew might start, not a script. Use your own words.

Open questions. "When you think about the next six months, what's something you'd really like to have happen? Not something the program wants. Something you want."
Simple reflections. Say back what you heard, including the feeling under it: "Sounds like

you've had a lot of people telling you how to live, and you're pretty tired of hearing it."
Two-sided reflections. When someone says two things at once, give both back without choosing: "Part of what you heard sounds familiar, and another part doesn't quite fit."
Asking permission. "Would you mind if I told you something about how I looked at things at your age? It's fine if you'd rather not."

Labels

TIP 35 is clear that pushing a label like "alcoholic" or "addict" tends to create resistance. Cookie calls that freeing. We can explore what's happening in somebody's life without settling on a word first. The conversation can be about what matters to the person and what they might want to be different. If a label ever fits, it'll be theirs to pick up, in their own time.

Developing discrepancy, the honest version of "planting a seed"

Taco asked Mateo what a good night out looks like when everything goes fine. Mateo said: you go out, have a good time, come home, don't lose your car. Then Taco asked how this past year compared. "Not great, man." Taco didn't point out the gap. Mateo built his own yardstick and measured himself against it. That's developing discrepancy, from motivational interviewing: the distance between what somebody wants and what's happening, in their own words. It works the same way with Earl in the kitchen: "You told me getting off paper matters to you. How's it been going with that in mind?"

Change talk, and the other kind

Change talk is anything that leans toward changing: "I want my kids to trust me." "I could probably do mornings." "I need to stop missing work." "I'm going to call Thursday." Sustain talk leans the other way, and around the house we just call it pushback: "I've got it handled." "It's not that bad." "You don't know my life." Both are normal, and you'll often hear them in the same conversation. The part that changed how Taco listens: people are often already telling us what matters to them. We miss it when we're busy thinking about what we want to say next.

SAY IT BACK	ASK FOR MORE	NOTICE THE WIN
"You've been thinking about the Saturday breakfast?"	"What got you thinking about going?"	"Your cousin's got a year and liked it. I can see why that got your attention."

When you hear change talk, those three small moves let the person hear their own idea twice. What the crew tries not to do is jump on it ("I'll pick you up at seven, done"). The moment the plan becomes ours, people tend to go quiet.

Two tracks: support the person, route the house problem

Sometimes the person who isn't interested in change is also pulling others away from it. Earl in the kitchen, telling Curtis it's all a business. Two different things are happening there, and the crew keeps them separate. The person still gets respect, reflection and curiosity. The behavior that's affecting the house goes to your supervisor, the way your agency says to handle it: what you saw and heard, kept to the behavior, not your opinion of the person and not a diagnosis. Nobody carries it alone. Then, quietly, you go find the person who was trying and get curious about their own reasons, so those reasons stay theirs.

Who's this for?

Our lived experience is a big part of why peer support works, and it fits a conversation best when it's asked for, short, clearly ours, and connected to something the person was already wondering about. The check Taco and Dom use before they open their mouth: who's this for? Me, or the person I'm talking with? If it's for them, offer it, with permission. If it's for us, a meeting or somebody in our own support network is a good place for it.

"Not yet" is allowed

Ethan hasn't said much. He heard something that sounded like him and something that didn't, and he's sitting with both. Nobody in the course tries to say the word for him. The Big Book talks about people finding out for themselves, and the crew likes that idea. Sponsor, pastor, coach, mentor, counselor, friend: the relationship looks different from person to person. He can explore what fits, in his own time, in his own words.

Where are they? What are they saying? Hand it back.

You can't push a rope. You can pick up your end.

The course guide · Part one · Where are they?

Three guys, one van · Earl, Mateo, Ethan

Thirty minutes to the clinic. Earl: "I'm here because my PO told me to be here. I need my paper signed." Mateo: "I'm twenty. Everybody I hang out with drinks. I just happened to get caught." Ethan: "...Yeah." Same van, same ride, three different places. Taco felt himself wanting to turn around and say something, and remembered he's never seen anybody suddenly see things differently because he pointed it out.

The stages, in plain words · Cookie

Prochaska and DiClemente, early 1980s. Precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and recurrence, which isn't the end of the story. Five lines from the video, each one a clue: "I'm only here for my PO" (precontemplation). "I keep saying I'll call about the job program, I just haven't" (contemplation). "My first meeting's Thursday, what should I expect?" (preparation). "Ninety days today" (action). "Two years, I go to the Tuesday meeting whether I need it or not" (maintenance).

The fix-it urge · Dom and Mateo

Dom tries: "I remember being twenty and thinking everybody drank, too. I just wonder if you're brushing past something here." Mateo: "You don't really know me. I've got friends who drink way more than I do." Then: "Nah. I'm good. For real."

The righting reflex. Dom argued for change, and Mateo argued for staying the same. Taco, afterward: "What helped me was getting a little more comfortable with not having the answer right away. I'd get curious, listen, maybe ask a question. Sometimes that gave the other person room to wonder out loud."

Matching the stage · Taco with all three

Earl (precontemplation): "When you think about the next six months, what's something you'd really like to have happen? Not something the program wants." Earl: "Off paper. That's it." Taco: "Yeah, getting off paper. I can understand why that matters to you." **Find what they want. Take it seriously.**

Mateo (contemplation): "What's your favorite part of going out? ... What about the other side? Anything about those nights you could do without?" Mateo: "Waking up and checking my phone to find out what I did the night before." **Both sides, his words, no verdict.**

Ethan (contemplation, maybe moving toward preparation): "Part of what you heard sounds pretty familiar, and another part doesn't quite fit. I can understand having mixed feelings about it." **A two-sided reflection. He gets to be unsure without being wrong.**

"I'm just young" · Taco and Mateo

TIP 35: pushing a label tends to backfire, and nobody needs the word to start. Taco: "In your mind, what's a good night out look like?" Mateo: "You go out, have a good time, you come home. You don't lose your car." Taco: "When you think about this past year, how's it been compared to that?" Mateo: "Not great, man." That's developing discrepancy. Mateo noticed the gap himself.

Asking before sharing. "Would you mind if I told you something about how I looked at things when I was your age? It's fine if you'd rather not." Taco kept it short, kept it about himself, and ended with "That's how it went for me, anyway. Your experience is your own." **Ask first. Keep it short. Own it as yours.**

PRECONTEMPLATION	CONTEMPLATION	PREPARATION	ACTION	MAINTENANCE
What do you want?	Both sides, their words	Answer what they asked	Notice the work	A lot going on

The course guide · Part two · What are they saying?

Change talk and the other kind · Cookie

Change talk: "I want," "I could," "I need to," "I'm going to." Pushback: "I've got it handled," "It's not that bad," "You don't know my life." Eight lines from the video, sorted: "I could do the morning meeting if somebody drove" (change). "It's not that bad, I've seen worse" (pushback). "I need to get my license back" (change). "My PO's the one with the problem" (pushback). "I'd like my daughter to call me" (change). "Everybody I know drinks" (pushback). "I'm going to try the Thursday group" (change). "I'm good, for real" (pushback). In real conversations you'll hear a little of both.

What to do when you hear it · Dom and Curtis

Curtis: "I was thinking maybe I could go to that Saturday thing." **Dom:** "You've been thinking about checking that out?" (say it back) … "What got you thinking about going?" (ask for more) … "So your cousin's been going, he's got a year, and he's had a pretty good experience. I can see why that got your attention." (notice the win)

Taco: "Somebody mentions a meeting, and I'm already figuring out when to pick them up. Sometimes I move faster than the person I'm talking with. Dom gave Curtis some room to think it through for himself."

The house · Earl, Curtis, Taco

Tuesday night, the kitchen. Earl to Curtis: "It's a business, man. We're customers." Taco, from the doorway, could defend the meetings. Instead: "Earl, it sounds like you've had a lot of people telling you how to live over the years, and you're pretty tired of hearing it." Earl: "Yeah. I am." Taco: "I'm not looking to be another person doing that."

Then: "You told me the other day that getting off paper was really important to you. I'm curious how things have been going around here with that in mind." Earl: "It ain't going great. You know it ain't." Nothing got resolved in that kitchen, and that's okay. They left it there.

Two tracks. Taco kept treating Earl with respect, and he brought what was happening in the house to his supervisor: what he saw and heard, the behavior, not his opinion of Earl and not a diagnosis. His house has its own way of handling it; other agencies handle it differently. **Support the person. Route the house problem.**

Protecting the ones who are growing · Taco and Curtis

Later that week, not about Earl at all. "You still thinking about the Saturday breakfast?" Curtis: "Earl was saying some stuff about it." Taco: "I'm curious what you were thinking before that conversation. What had you interested in going?" Curtis gets to talk about his cousin, his own reason, without anybody deciding for him. And Ethan is still figuring things out. Not yet is allowed.

Your own story · Taco and Dom

Taco: "My story fits better when I ask first. I keep it short and make it clear I'm talking about what happened to me, not what I think is going to happen to somebody else."

Dom: "I've caught myself telling a story because I really wanted to tell it, not because the other person was asking." **Taco:** "Something I started asking myself is, who's this for?"

The whole course on one line

Where are they? What are they saying? Hand it back. · Notice the stage, notice your own urge to fix, notice the change talk, and give it back to them. · House problems go to your supervisor, the way your agency says. Everything else is their call.

Where this comes from

1. SAMHSA (2019 update). *TIP 35: Enhancing Motivation for Change in Substance Use Disorder Treatment* (PEP19-02-01-003). The stages of change, recurrence, the effect of labels, and motivational approaches. store.samhsa.gov
2. Prochaska, J. O., & DiClemente, C. C. (1983). Stages and processes of self-change of smoking: Toward an integrative model of change. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 51(3), 390–395. The transtheoretical model.
3. Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (3rd ed.). Guilford Press. The righting reflex, change talk and sustain talk, reflections, developing discrepancy.
4. Ohio Administrative Code 5122-29-15.1, Certified peer supporter, (N)(4): the strengths-based, person-driven model and the role of lived experience. codes.ohio.gov/ohio-administrative-code/rule-5122-29-15.1
5. Ohio Administrative Code 5122-29-15, Peer support services, (B) and (D): individualized, person-driven services and informed choice. codes.ohio.gov/ohio-

administrative-code/rule-5122-29-15

6. Alcoholics Anonymous (2001). *Alcoholics Anonymous* (4th ed.), the idea that people find out for themselves, referenced in part two. One pathway among many; this course respects every pathway to recovery.
7. *Playing God in Sweatpants* (2025), by the course author. The van rides and the "you can't push a rope" idea are retold from it; the professional standards above are what the teaching stands on.

The scenes in the course are fictional teaching examples at H.E.L.P., a fictional peer support agency. Earl, Mateo, Ethan, Dom and Curtis are made up. The lines are examples of how the H.E.L.P. crew might talk, not a script and not a validated clinical technique. Peer supporters do not deliver motivational interviewing as treatment; the ideas here are borrowed as a way of listening. Your own agency's policies and supervision always come first. References checked November 3, 2026. Course version: OPS 008 v1.