

# Why Won't They Change?

By Dr. Craig Loving

At some time in his ministry, every pastor has encountered a person or group who knows they need to make a fundamental change in some aspect of their lives – but don’t. Our minds race with questions like: Can’t they see the problem they’re facing (or making)? Aren’t they motivated to change? Are they just resistant? Or could it be something else?

Could it be that the person knows that a change is necessary, but is ambivalent about changing? Authors Miller and Rollnick suggest four types of ambivalence that keep a person in the “I want to, but don’t want to” dilemma:

1. **Approach/avoidance ambivalence:** The person is both attracted to and repelled by the change. Some aspects of the proposed change are appealing, other aspects are threatening. The change doesn’t happen because both poles of the change are balanced against each other.
2. **Approach/approach ambivalence:** Change option “A” and change option “B” are equally attractive options. Since “A” and “B” are equally balanced, no change occurs, because to choose “A” means a rejection of “B.”
3. **Avoidance/avoidance:** This person can’t bring himself to change because “the lesser of two evils” doesn’t exist; both are equally bad.
4. **Double-approach/avoidance:** This person finds equally attractive and repelling characteristics in both issues; when he/she moves toward the positives in “A,” the negatives become prominent. But the same thing happens when he/she moves toward the positives in “B.”

What can be done to help the person who finds himself in one of these ambivalent dilemmas? Whatever you do, **do not** prescribe your own course of action. “John, I think you should...” Most of the time John will give one of two responses: (a) a list of reasons why your suggested changes won’t work; or (b) an initial compliance with your recommendation with no motivation (“buy in”) to continue the action after you’ve moved on. Frequently, such people are quick to revert back to their old behaviors.

Miller & Rollnick offer several strategies for helping your counselee overcome their ambivalence. Here are two:

- Guide your counselee to develop their own arguments for change. When people articulate their own reasons for action, they are more likely to follow through with it. “When you think about changing, how do you answer the objections that other part of you gives for not changing?”
- Amplify the discrepancy between your counselee’s present behavior and their own stated life-goals or self-perception. “Help me understand how this [e.g., irresponsibility] fits with how you see yourself as an [upstanding Christian, church member, etc].”

Change is a difficult process that defies simplistic solutions. Helping people change requires prayer, patience, and perseverance.

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