



The seemingly obvious question when dealing with behavior change during the perinatal period is: “How can we help women make changes to improve the health of their babies?” However this question is missing a key variable that is critical in behavior change, the woman’s opinion on the behavior in question. It is a frustrating fact of life that you cannot GIVE a person the motivation to change. If someone genuinely does not want to change a behavior, there is not much you can do to help them. The silver lining of this cloud is, if someone is ambivalent, or unsure about whether or not to make a change, you have an opportunity to have an impact by helping the participant to develop discrepancy.

Discrepancy, in the world of behavior change, is the difference between our current behaviors and our values or goals. When our behaviors don’t match with our values or goals, it makes us uncomfortable. A simple example of this is the desire for a pregnant woman to want what is best for her baby, while at the same time using tobacco during her pregnancy. The behavior contradicts with the value, and she may feel uncomfortable about her tobacco use. This discomfort is okay, as it can help elicit motivation from the participant.

The tricky part of this process is that for it to be most effective, the participant needs to be the one identifying that the discrepancy exists. The [decisional balance worksheet](#) can be a helpful tool in identifying some factors that might help a woman develop discrepancy. Many times you can lead a participant to this point through effective open ended questions and reflective listening statements; however there will be times when women need an outside perspective to help them. When you find yourself in this situation, it is far more effective to do so with reflective listening or summary statements emphasizing her goals or values, than questions. For example:

“You say you want to be a good mom, but how does that work with your smoking?”

Is much less effective (and more likely to result in resistance), than:

“On one hand, you’ve had a lot of trouble in the past with quitting, but on the other hand it sounds like this is really important to you, to make a change for your baby.”

When using a point/counterpoint summary statement like this, it is important to remember that you always end with the point that leads toward change.

A few tips for developing discrepancy:

- Always build rapport first. The goal of developing discrepancy is to make your participant uncomfortable with the status quo. If she doesn’t feel comfortable with you, she may not be receptive to your input, and you will not be able to help her develop discrepancy.
- Be comfortable with silence. Your participant may be identifying a discrepancy for the first time and may need some time to mentally process the situation.
- Try to avoid convincing or persuading that a discrepancy exists, as it will be significantly more effective when a participant identifies the discrepancy on their own.