



## Enhancing Insight

What a challenge it is to try to enhance insight! One of the biggest obstacles to increasing insight, is that it requires insight to increase insight. The easiest way to increase one's understanding of oneself is to take the time and effort required to "look inside". The problem with people who lack insight is, that they either don't want to look inside themselves for deeper meaning, or they falsely believe that they are aware of their true motives and inner desires when they really have no clue. A person may identify themselves as saying "I am sure that I do not have a problem" but the reality may be one of two things:

1. There really is not a problem and the person making that statement is correct
2. The person making that statement really does have a problem but lacks insight

When in doubt the safer answer usually is to go with #2. There is much less harm done with falsely assuming there is a problem that isn't there, than the alternative of accepting statement #1 at face value but in reality there is a problem\*. In other words, if a person says they do not have a problem, and in reality they do not, then there is no harm done by looking deeper into oneself to make absolutely sure that there is no problem. If there really is not a problem, then after insight building activities the result will be the same as at the start with no harm done. There is a proportion of people out there who do not believe they have a problem but really do. Therefore, in this much more frequent scenario particularly in the substance use issue world, insight building activities are extremely helpful and necessary. The potential gains by participating in insight building activities far outweigh any risks of unnecessary insight building

\*It is critical that counselors reading this do not engage in a confrontational, accusatory or argumentative stance which can be very harmful. If someone does not believe they have a problem, when in fact they really do, this situation has to be handled with great care on behalf of the counselor. If you are a counselor, make sure to read [The Escalator – Tools of Engagement](#)

### **A basic follow up assessment to determine that increased insight may be needed. Consider the following insight questions:**

1. Is there a gap between what you believe about the identified problem and what others who know you and care about you think? (For example, if you do not believe that you have a problem, are there others who believe differently?)
2. Is this the first time you have gotten into some kind of trouble or are there other times? (Multiple consequences are one of the biggest indicators that there is more wrong than one may believe)
3. If you do not believe you have a problem now, was there ever a time in the past where you thought that you had a problem?
4. Even if you do not believe that you have a problem, do you ever wish you could stop or better control your situation? (It is likely that if one really does not have a problem, they will not think about the need to stop or attempt to gain control)
5. If you are using substances, do you really believe that you can stop any time that you want to without any trouble? (Many people use the excuse that they just don't want to stop when in reality, they can't – there is a fine line between not wanting to stop using and not being able to stop)

A person may answer "no" for all 5 of these questions however there still may be a problem present. That is because a deficit in insight can be extremely deep rooted. Regardless, if insight is to be increased then it is important to practice honest self-evaluation and to be open minded to the *other side* of the issue. Any quest for insight must include increasing one's ability to consider opinions and viewpoints outside of their own.

It is important to note that a person who lacks insight does not necessarily lack conviction. To the contrary a person with impaired insight may actually have extremely strong conviction for what they believe. The problem is, however what we believe may be inaccurate or irrational. Strong conviction about one's beliefs alone does not make one's beliefs any truer or more accurate. The problem with that for helpers, counselor's and family members working with people with an apparent substance use and coexisting issues is that it is extremely challenging to get someone with strong conviction to consider that they may need adjustment in their thinking.



Counselors have been struggling with this issue for years. If you challenge someone's viewpoints directly, the success rate with regard to increasing insight is very poor and often has the reverse effect because confrontation often increases conviction and resistance to change as opposed to breaking it down. So if this section of the Escalator is about helping those with limited insight to increase their insight, their needs to be a less confrontational approach to getting others to look at things differently. The first activity to follow: Taking a Trip to the Other Side provides a way to approach this challenging issue. The key to this challenge is developing empathy.

Agreement is a beautiful thing. When people can agree it sets the stage for learning and for personal growth. Imagine if you could get others to agree with you whenever you needed to. Life would be easy. If you are a person with a possible substance use issue reading this and you do not believe that you have a problem, imagine how much better it would be if everyone just agreed with you and left you alone. If you are a loved one or a counselor working with a substance user/abuser imagine how great it would be if you could just explain how much better life would be if changes were made and how great it would be if the person you are explaining this to agreed with your viewpoint and embraced the need to make changes. How wonderful the world would be if we could all get others to agree to do what we believe is best for them. Unfortunately however, reality is much different. Agreement and compromise are much bigger hurdles to jump in most cases, particularly with regard to substance use and coexisting issues. Focusing on empathy instead of agreement is a nonthreatening way to set the stage for insight building rather than struggling to get others to agree with what we think. This is because before anyone can agree with what we think is right; they have to *understand* our viewpoint first. Learning *empathy without agreement* is the starting point for this insight building process.

Complete the "Taking a Trip to the Other Side" activity below and read the supplemental reading "Empathy without Agreement" by clicking on the links below:



Click here to view ["Taking a Trip to the Other Side"](#)



Supplemental Reading - Click to View: [Empathy Without Agreement](#)

### **Enhancing Insight – Change Analysis:**

The concept of a "Change Experiment" is an excellent practical tool included in a lot of different methods and strategies for overcoming substance use issues. A Change Experiment is mainly used with a person who does not believe they have a problem (in other words, someone who lacks insight). That person is asked to try abstinence for a predetermined period (like a week or two) on a trial basis. The actual desired goal is that if there is an actual substance abuse problem the person will ultimately fail in their change experiment because a person with a problem will not be able to abstain from using for an extended period. Thus, a failed change experiment is in itself a tool for insight building. The person who is unable to follow the rules of the change experiment is supposed to realize that they cannot control their use and therefore they then must have more of a problem than they originally realized which in theory leads increased insight. In simple terms, a change experiment challenges the assertion made by many who say "I can quit any time that I want to!" by asking that person to prove it. The change experiment is a counselor or family member's way of gently saying back to the person: "Oh yeah, put your money where your mouth is" or in other words "Talk is cheap, let's see some action!" Consider a few examples of proposed change experiments:

SUBSTANCE USER - "I can quit smoking easily, I just don't want to"

HELPER – "OK, let's see if you can go a week without a cigarette" (Proposed Change Experiment)

USER– "I can lose weight easily if I want to"



HELPER – “Do you think that you could lose five pounds by the 30<sup>th</sup> of the month” (Proposed change experiment)

USER – “I don’t need to smoke weed, I just really like it”

HELPER– “Well, since you just got arrested anyway why don’t you see if you can go until your court date next month without smoking weed, just in case you get drug tested at court?” (Proposed change experiment with cleverly worked in use of external motivator)

As stated earlier, the change experiment can be a very powerful when it works. It can help someone realize that actually changing a behavior is a lot more challenging when it comes to action as opposed to just talking about it. However, the change experiment does not always achieve the desired result with those who lack insight. Let us consider some reasons why a change experiment may not always be a good option:

**1.** Risk of harm issues may prevent suggesting or allowing a change experiment. If there is a significant risk of overdose, psychiatric or medical hospitalization, or other serious harm to oneself or others if substance use continues then it is essential to be extremely careful with these issues. In such a case a Change Experiment may not be a good idea because of the potential risks involved. For example, suppose a person entered an outpatient facility but had relapsed with heroin use and has a history of multiple overdoses. Taking the time to attempt a change experiment in such a situation could prove to be fatal if unsuccessful due to overdose potential and a more structured approach to the problem is a safer course of action such as a referral for residential treatment or for medicated assisted treatment options, for example. ASAM placement criteria should always be considered in coordination with current risk issues, (American Society of Addiction Medicine, 2001)

**2.** A person who attempts a change experiment may be able to succeed in temporarily abstaining from using or successfully controlling their use in order to prove a point. Even some individuals who have an actual substance abuse problem may still be able to pull this off. The main problem with someone who has a substance abuse problem who can successfully manage a change experiment, is that in the end this experiment may end up reinforcing a false assumption that this person is in full control of their use and therefore does not have a problem. In that case, insight may actually decreased instead of increased. Binge users, for example often do not have a problem abstaining for significant periods in between binges, therefore creating a false sense of security.

**3.** A person who agrees to try a change experiment may fail by continuing to use despite the challenge to either abstain or try to control their use. Unfortunately, that alone does not always build insight due to the unfortunate stubborn reaction some substance users may conclude even after they keep using in spite of the challenge not too. That conclusion often is “I only used because I didn’t want to stop, not because I couldn’t stop” Those with insight know that there is a thin line between not wanting to stop and not being able to stop, however some individuals may thoroughly convince themselves that they are in complete control despite not being able to prove it.

**4.** A person who has a substance use problem may accept the challenge involved in a change experiment but then proceed to deceptively demonstrate compliance. In other words, the person involved the change experiment may keep using but then go through whatever efforts necessary in order to try to hide their use and make it look like they were successful in abstaining from substance use when in actuality they were not. Most people are familiar with the efforts that some people go through in order to hide substance use and “beat” drug tests by somehow concealing their substance use. Obviously, a change experiment may be futile when attempted under false pretenses.

Often the missing piece to successfully utilizing a change experiment is the presence of an external motivator. The presence of an external motivator such as a probation officer, employer or valid threat by a family member



is often the critical factor needed to get someone who may be lacking in insight to attempt a change experiment. In such a case, where there are consequences present for continuing to use substances, a person is obviously more likely to be inclined to engage in a change experiment because they have something to gain. When there is no external incentive present, getting someone to try a change experiment willingly is not impossible but may be much more of a challenge.

In conclusion, a change experiment can still be a valuable technique for building insight. If a traditional change experiment is to be attempted, it is critical that a solid rapport is built between substance user and helper in order to minimize lying and cheating on drug tests. Furthermore, expectations with regard to what happens if a person is not able to change should be agreed upon and discussed beforehand. A discussion about the concept of not wanting to stop as opposed to not being able to stop should be reviewed beforehand so that the table is set to diminish that excuse before it is used. Below is a checklist to review before attempting a change experiment:

- \_\_\_\_\_ There is no significant health risk or other potential immediate harms present that may make a traditional change experiment too dangerous to attempt.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Before attempting the change experiment, there can be an agreement reached beforehand with regard to what it means if the experiment is unsuccessful. How to define success, should also be defined and agreed upon beforehand
- \_\_\_\_\_ There is a sense from the perspective of the helper monitoring the change experiment that the person participating is willing to make a sincere and honest effort as opposed to just trying to be deceptive or misleading
- \_\_\_\_\_ It is helpful if there are available tests to measure efforts to quit or cut down use such as some form of drug testing in addition to just relying upon self-report which can be inaccurate or dishonest.
- \_\_\_\_\_ If a significant amount of these factors are present in order for a change experiment to be attempted then give it a try. The goal is for the change experiment to help the substance user/abuser and other involved parties to gain insight based on the outcome and then use that outcome to make decisions needed to move forward in the process of upward change

#### A Different Option – A Change Analysis:

A Change Analysis is similar to a traditional Change Experiment however it is slightly different in that a Change Analysis is more of a developmental learning tool than just an outright challenge. Download and complete the Change Analysis activity by clicking below:



[Click here to view “What is a Change Analysis”](#)

#### Enhancing Insight Activity – Point of View Adjustment (POVA)

A Point of View Adjustment or POVA is similar to what is often referred to as a *paradigm shift*. The main difference between a POVA and what is often referred to as a paradigm shift is that a paradigm shift often implies a more drastic “shift” from what is considered an ideal or model situation. A POVA is more subtle and less heavy handed. A paradigm shift can be extremely powerful however it is a lot to ask a person who may lack insight to embrace a radical change of view away from what was once considered the model or commonly accepted viewpoint, aka the initial paradigm. To understand this better let’s consider what a paradigm is and how a paradigm shift is often defined.

**paradigm** -an example serving as a model; pattern.

**paradigm shift** - change from one way of thinking to another.



When describing a paradigm shift words may be used including “transformation” “metamorphosis” “revolution” and “radical change”. That in theory is a wonderful concept but in practice, particularly with regard to substance use and coexisting issues, things like radical change, and transformation are the ideal but not the norm. All of those who work with people who abuse substances would love to see exceptional and drastic results that are known to accompany a successful upward change on a long term basis. The problem is that when there is a lack of insight, as we are addressing in this section, the prognosis for radical change is an uphill climb for most. It is important to stay hopeful and positive however it is also important to be realistic. Therefore a paradigm shift, especially when insight is lacking, may be too lofty of a goal especially early in the upward change process. A Point of View Adjustment (POVA) as we are going to discuss, although similar to a paradigm shift can be viewed as a much more subtle, gradual form of change which for many is much easier to accept

World history has taught all of us that “forced” conversions or other attempts to coerce people into believing something that they do not want to believe is a waste of time and often does even more to cause people to resist change rather than embrace it. Therefore, the POVA exercise is similar to the “Taking a Trip to the Other Side” activity presented earlier in the matrix, in that the activity involves merely looking at and thinking about other points of view even if we believe they are wrong or inaccurate. Again this activity hinges upon the concept of empathy without need for agreement. Which in other words is all about learning to understand other people’s viewpoints even when we do not agree with them.

Keep this in mind: It is extremely difficult to get another person to change their point of view. Most people are well aware of that fact. For years people have been trying to come up with the secrets of persuasion and influencing others to see things in a new light. It is important to acknowledge the difficulty of this task before undertaking this challenge. The following activity, the Point of View Adjustment, focuses on simply taking the time to just briefly consider other viewpoints to start. If we can’t simply “convert” to a new point of view, it is at least a step in the right direction if we can at least start to consider other sides of the story

**Specifically For Helpers** - Often, the process of getting someone to take the time to conceptualize something different is similar to the idea of getting a “seed” planted that may one day sprout into a new idea, particularly if evidence later arises to support that new idea. Evidence can be like water being poured on the seed that helps make it grow.

*Consider an example:*

- Initial Belief – A woman newly in love is enamored with her boyfriend and finally thinks she found “the one”
- Alternate Viewpoint Introduced – The woman’s friend meets this new boyfriend a few times and being more objective she is able to see signs that he has a wandering eye and there is reason to believe he is capable of cheating on her and possibly already looking to do so.
- Initial Reaction – The woman newly in love does everything in her power to convince her friend and herself that there is no way that this is true of her new love.
- Evidence Introduced – All of a sudden the woman notices her new boyfriend gets strange phone calls at strange hours. The woman catches the new boyfriend in some subtle lies about where he was when she was not around. Inconsistencies arise in some of his stories.
- Desired Effect – A “seed” was able to be introduced by the friend who introduced the new viewpoint that maybe this boyfriend is not as ideal as he seems, even though she did not believe it at first. The evidence this woman is starting to see for herself in her new boyfriend, such as the mysterious hidden phone calls, “waters” that seed and she starts consider a new viewpoint: “Maybe this guy is not so great after all” she begins to wonder. Her point of view was successfully adjusted. *Insight is increased*

Granted, the desired insight-building effect is not always the actual response to this and to similar situations. Denial is indeed a powerful thing and people’s emotional and psychological defense mechanisms can play all kinds of tricks on one’s perception of reality. Nevertheless, in certain situations, dependent upon the way the “seed” of another viewpoint is planted and then watered, there is at least some hope that perhaps an eventual viewpoint change can develop. This exercise, the Point of View Adjustment, is focused on helping someone to



open up to different viewpoints to enhance the likelihood that if these new viewpoints are effectively introduced, perhaps over time they may influence increased insight and upward change under the right circumstances.

In the case of substance use issues, a person may be completely sure they do not have a problem. Through the point of view analysis exercise this same person will hopefully at least consider why someone else may feel differently about their substance use and also why others may see their use as problematic. The next time a consequence arises, such as the overdrinking then missing work, for example, they may at least start thinking differently about substance use. The new evidence experienced by consequences and other eye opening events may result in renewed thinking that perhaps there is less control over their drinking than initially believed, for example.

Logic and reason are effective and absolutely necessary for learning but unfortunately in many instances, logic and reason alone are not enough to initiate a change in one's point of view. Still, looking at logic and reason is a great place to at least start this process.



[Click here to view \*POVA: Point of View Adjustment\*](#)

**POVA Analysis** – In a perfect world, someone would complete this exercise and their eyes would be opened, seeing all the good reasons to change and then feeling a strong desire to make those changes. Obviously that is a long shot as people don't change that easily. Still, this exercise can have long term benefits as the process of looking at other points of view has been cognitively expanded and awareness is increased. It is important that every time this exercise is completed there is a manner of recording the evidence and reviewing it over time. For example, if this exercise is done in a counseling or other helping setting, the evidence should be reviewed periodically, particularly if anything that is in the evidence list on the POVA ever occurs. For example:

CLIENT– “I have something to confess to you, I am going to need your help with the courts because I got my second DUI over the weekend. I barely remember even getting into the car.

COUNSELOR – “Of course I will help you but we will need to address this issue. Do you remember when we did the POVA exercise last month? Let's take a look at that. Do you remember what you said would be evidence that you need to think about changing your drinking?”

CLIENT– “Yes I remember. I was so sure I would never get another DUI and I said that if I ever did, I would strongly consider changing my drinking habits.

COUNSELOR – “Ok then let's come up with a new game plan going forward”

It may not always go that easily, however the POVA can be used as a tool to discuss changes and consequences as they arise because those situations are so often insight building experiences. The POVA exercise is designed to enhance the insight building through discussion of these insight building activities over time as new issues occur

Another Option – Video Sponsor – Previously the idea of using cell phone or other video recording technology to record yourself can be a useful tool. In this situation a willing person who completed the POVA can make a powerful message for themselves with regard to the evidence that would support that they need to look at things differently. For example, a video could say something like (person speaking to himself via video) - “If I ever start using heroin, I am going to check myself into rehab right away” Then if a person starts using heroin, as in this example, the video can be used to review past thoughts on the issue that can help build current insight and influence effective action if the need arises.



Before moving on to other areas of the Escalator, it is important to think about the fact that increasing insight is one of the more challenging aspects of the upward change process, if not the most challenging. If insight remains low, it is important to continue revisiting this area periodically until it increases. It is appropriate to try to subsequently work on other areas such as internal motivation in the interim in between efforts to revisit the critical issue of insight.

One thing to consider is that insight often changes over time particularly in relation to circumstances. A good illustration is that insight and awareness is like a window that opens and closes, so when there are signs that the window for insight building is open, it is a good idea to reopen the discussion and get back to the work necessary for insight building. Consequences such as legal issues, employment problems, financial concerns, health problems, etc. often precede the opening of the “window” of insight. If a Point of View Adjustment was effectively completed then this can be a re-useable tool for discussion and self-analysis.

