Nearly every new inquiry about senior housing relates to an older adult that is struggling with serious problems, difficulties and dissatisfactions in their current living situation that negatively affect their quality of life. These issues generally involve chronic health issues that limit normal functioning or unfulfilled needs associated with:

- Personal safety
- Lack of socialization
- Poor nutrition
- Personal care oversight
- Medication management
- Family dynamics
- Self-expression
- Home maintenance

Given the incredible benefits offered by the many and varied senior housing options, senior housing should sell itself. But strong emotional resistance results in over 90% of qualified Prospects being “not ready” to change their living situation, even if a change would result in a significantly better quality of life.

Stages of Change in Senior Housing Sales
One On One employs a Prospect-Centered and relationship-based selling style that consistently produces higher sales conversion ratios, especially with higher functioning Prospects, that are not already facing an immediate crisis.

This selling style is Prospect rather than transaction centered. The approach addresses underlying emotional resistance with techniques designed to raise awareness and promote self-persuasion before offering the option of senior housing as a solution. It is characterized by spending more time building relationships with Prospects before they reach a need-driven crisis. This selling style is supported with:

- Deliberate and ongoing planning for each Prospect face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction
- Extensive journaling of Prospect statements and conversational patterns
- Creative, personalized follow-up initiatives

The Stages of Change model supports and reinforces One On One’s Prospect-Centered selling style. The model helps sales counselors inspire and motivate reluctant Prospects to advance towards a decision to make lifestyle changes by providing specific, action-oriented guidelines.

The Stages of Change Model
(also called the Transtheoretical Model)

The model was developed by James Prochaska, John Norcross and Carlo de Clemente using more than 50 different quantitative studies on thousands of individuals with problems including smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, stress management and weight control.

Changing for Good (Harper Collins, 1995) provides an excellent overview of the model.

The authors are leading clinical psychologists, university professors and research collaborators.

Their theories have been tested, revised and improved through scores of empirical studies.
These guidelines are consistent with motivational interviewing as well as other theories, practices and processes used by One On One.

The model offers distinct screening filters for determining where a Prospect is on the change continuum. It identifies behaviors and statements that characterize each stage and requires the sales counselor to build trusting relationships, engage in purposeful questioning, active listening, as well as extensive journaling, planning and follow-up.

At any time during the sales process, each Prospect’s behavior and statements are associated with one of four stages of “readiness.” No one stage is considered to be more important than another. Linear progression through all of the stages is possible but very rare. Depending on what triggers the initial inquiry, Prospects can start out at any one of the four stages. In general, the more crisis driven and higher acuity the Prospect is in, the more ready they are likely to be.

Prospects frequently move back and forth from one stage to another – even during the same conversation! Nevertheless, there are strategic milestones for each stage that indicate that the Prospect has, at least for the moment, advanced to a new stage of Readiness. The nomenclature and examples below reflect One On One’s adaptation of the model for use by Senior Housing Sales Counselors.

**STAGE 1: DENIAL**

**Common defenses:**
Making the least of it: Denial and minimization is a refusal to acknowledge unpleasant occurrences and pretend that disagreeable realities simply do not exist.

For example, read an excerpted interview with Prospects Ed and Rozine.

**Counselor:** How did you start the process of looking at assisted living communities?

**Rozine:** Our doctors told us we had no choice and would have to move to an assisted living community.

**Ed:** I don’t really believe what he said. I’m going to see another doctor.

**Counselor:** Maybe you’re hoping that someone says they were wrong the whole time?

**Ed:** That’s right. I wish that they would look into it and see that it was all a mistake.

**Good excuses:** Rationalization is the offer of a plausible explanation for staying, and intellectualization is the use of abstract analysis to rob events of personal significance.

**Counselor:** Sounds like you want to delay making any decisions.

**Ed:** It’s a tough thing to do. When we built this house we were planning to stay until they closed the casket. We have lived here for 37 ½ years now and accumulated a lot of things. You know, there’re pictures and postcards on the wall. Do you keep those things or not? No way we can move before we get rid of all this stuff.

**Tuning out:** Projection happens when a Prospect points to someone else with the problem they are experiencing.

**Counselor:** Who’s making this decision today?

**Ed:** She is. She’s the boss.
Counselor: Ed, are you going to make it easier for Rozine?

Ed: Oh, yeah. I told her, “whatever you want to do.” The decision to move is hard enough. It’s easier to blame it on somebody else than to take it yourself.

Counselor: So, Rozine, what would help you make a decision?

Rozine: I’m waiting to hear that Ed is ready to go and that he will follow through on the decision.

Guidelines for helping Prospects in denial

A strategic goal helps the Prospect become more aware of their problems and difficulties so that they begin to think about the possibility of moving.

1. State intentions to help not convince or persuade.
   - Avoid taking on the role of the expert “who has all of the answers” and instead align, accept and validate.
   - Don’t substitute your views or assumptions about the “problems.”
   - Don’t try to argue or push someone into change until they are ready. Be patient.
   - Don’t give up or the Prospect will lose confidence – stay engaged and be confident.

Counselor: We wanted to state our intentions, which is to just be here for the two of you - not just for today, but ongoing to be a resource, a support for you, regardless of whether you move anywhere or not. Our intention is offer you our expertise and our resources if you need them. We understand that this is a decision that’s very difficult for most people. We also understand that it’s very much your decision, and you’re in control.

Ed: So thank you so much.

2. Align and build trusting relationships.
   - Align – acknowledge their autonomy and control. Be accepting, attentive and curious.
   - Establish an open, honest and non-judgmental rapport.
   - Empathetically engage and collaborate, as well as affirm and support.

3. Evoke discrepancy between the reality of continuing to live at home and what they really want for themselves.
   - Ask open-ended questions to elicit life stories and other situation questions, and then listen for themes and values—what motivates the Prospect.
   - Explore problems, difficulties, implications and expected outcomes of staying at home.
   - Be aware of the adult child’s or spousal ambivalence. They struggle on the one hand with being a “good daughter” or being a “good wife” while on the other hand being objective and realistic about what is really happening. Try to provide information and support.

Sample questions to address whether the prospect should consider moving:

- How did you start thinking about moving?
- What do you like most about your current lifestyle?
- What worries or concerns you about your current situation?
- Do your children think you should move?
- Are you as happy living here now as you were when you first moved?
- What do you think will happen if you don’t change anything?
STAGE 2: THINKING
Guidelines to help Prospect Advance

The strategic goal for Prospects in Stage 2 is to evoke “pro-change talk” where the Prospect openly acknowledges problems and disadvantages in their current situation.

1. Intensify/Amplify Discrepancy - Ask more direct questions to clarify and elaborate on each of their problems and implications in the current situation.
   - Ask for clarification: In what ways? How often? When did you first notice? What was it like before . . . ?
   - Ask for a specific example. How did you feel about . . . ?
   - Ask for a detailed description of the last time this occurred.
   - What concerns you the most about . . . ?
   - Does that ever lead to . . . ?
   - What effect does that have on . . . ?

2. Use motivational interviewing techniques including “reflections and summaries” to mirror and clarify responses.
   - Form a reasonable guess as to meaning, and then give voice in the form of a statement and not a question—it’s a statement of understanding intended to check rather than assume what you heard.

Ed: I see that things could get worse later than they are now. But we still haven’t got rid of all of our stuff, and when you start downsizing, you lose your kitchen and actually you lose your house when you move into an assisted living community.

Counselor: You definitely would lose your house. There’s no two ways about it. But if you wait for the house to be less important to you, you’ll never move.

Ed: That’s exactly right.

Counselor: Wow, that’s very interesting. What you are saying is that many people feel that a move to assisted living is closing the casket. Do you think that’s true?

   - Reflection can move the thought forward rather than simply repeating like an echo.

3. Compare goals, values and themes drawn from life stories to the reality of their current living situation.
STAGE 3: PLANNING
Guidelines to help Prospects advance from the planning stage

The strategic goal is to generate inquiries about the benefits of making a change including, but not limited to, a move to senior housing and move towards getting some kind of commitment.

1. Avoid the temptation to assume that once the Prospect is showing signs of readiness they have made a decision to move. Most Prospects take some tentative steps, still unsure of which way it is that they want to go. There usually is still quite a bit of ambivalence especially about “when” to move and a substantial risk of backsliding into an earlier stage of readiness.

2. A good first step is to summarize a Prospect’s current situation as you have come to understand it, including:
   - The Prospect’s perception of problems, difficulties and dissatisfactions of continuing to live in their current home
   - Summing up both sides that make up the Prospect’s ambivalence including some acknowledgement of what remains positive or attractive about staying where they are
   - Review of any personal observations or evidence that may be relevant to change
   - Restatement of any statements from the Prospect indicating that they may want, intend or plan to change

3. Try to elicit what the Prospect may want to do to address perceived problems. Here are some sample questions:
   - After reviewing all of this, what do you think should be the next step?
   - How do you see your options?
   - It sounds like things can’t stay the way they are now. What do you think you might do?
   - Of the options you have considered – fixing up your home, bringing in some help, moving in with your daughter or moving to a senior community – which ones make the most sense to you?

4. Often at this stage the Prospect will ask for advice. Provide relevant information about senior housing and your community and opportunities for them to visit and experience life there - but avoid the trap of trying to persuade:
   - I don’t know if this would work for you or not, but I can give you an idea of what some other people have done in your situation.
   - This may or may not make sense to you, but it’s one possibility.
   - The best I can give you is my opinion. You are really the one that has to find what works best.

5. Help formulate a “change plan.”
   - Clarify what the Prospect wants to achieve: “How would you like for things to be different?”
   - Discuss change options including a move to senior housing and to your community.
   - Create a step-by-step action plan.
6. Get a commitment for something. Consider smaller steps first:

- A return visit
- Accepting your assistance with a garage sale or developing a moving plan
- Addressing any family concerns or resistance
- Agreement to meet with existing residents, attend a meal or resident event
- Commitment for a trial stay

- Match specific benefits in your community’s programs and service offerings to Prospect needs.
- Describe the leasing process and details and attempt to close on a unit with a move in date.
- Solicit support and encouragement from the Prospect’s family and support system.

**Conclusion**

One on One has adapted the Stages of Change model to support and reinforce its Prospect-Centered approach to senior housing sales. The adapted model offers a different and better way to track, classify and prioritize the active lead base. More importantly, it facilitates a process that helps Prospects address and overcome deeply seeded emotional barriers to change.

Use of the Stages of Change model also provides action-oriented guidelines that motivate and inspire senior housing sales professionals to engage in meaningful and pro-active outreach particularly for higher functioning or so-called “cold” leads. Purposeful planning for each Prospect interaction based on an awareness of their current stage of readiness improves chances for success and hence leads to more sales and higher sales conversion ratios.

**About the Author, David Smith**

David Smith is co-owner and manager of 950 senior residences including The Gatesworth and Parc Provence in St. Louis both nationally recognized for innovation and quality. He is also a co-owner of Quail Ridge Assisted Living in Oklahoma and Mallard Cove Senior Living in Ohio.

He is the founder of One On One: Service to Seniors which provides assessments, training, and creative services across the US and Canada.

He regularly spends several months a year “hands-on” in the selling trenches and has personally conducted over 100 face-to-face prospect interviews during the past 12 months.

He is the Lead Instructor for the Sales and Marketing Program at the UMBC Erickson School of Aging.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Stage of Readiness</th>
<th>Prospect Behavior</th>
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| **Stage 1 – Denial**  
Stuck and hoping for magic |  
• Not fully aware or accepting of consequences of staying  
• Defensive: deflects conversations about problems and difficulties in current living situation  
• Initiative often comes from Spouse or Adult child | The Prospect is thinking about problems and difficulties in current residence. |  
• State Intentions – “help” not “sell” – align, build trust and validate feelings.  
• Acknowledge their control of the decision.  
• Explore expected outcomes of staying home without expressing judgment.  
• Evoke Life Stories and listen for themes and values.  
• Address Adult Child ambivalence and Educate. |
| **Stage 2 – Thinking**  
About problems and difficulties: on the fence about “Whether” |  
• Less defensive: willing to explore problems and difficulties in current residence  
• Focus is “looking back” with some regret on how things used to be  
• Ambivalent about “Whether” to stay in current residence (Head knows, Heart isn’t ready) | The Prospect has a willingness to acknowledge problems and desire to explore solutions. |  
• Evoke stories about prior life changes that were successful.  
• Promote self-evaluation of staying at home through use of reflections, amplifications and summaries.  
• Ask direct questions and probe their perceptions of each problem area and of likely future consequences.  
• Leave an opening for exploring small steps “forward.” |
| **Stage 3 – Planning**  
Testing the waters but issue is “When” |  
• Acknowledges problems and difficulties of staying home are serious  
• Ambivalent about “When” to address problems (not yet a priority)  
• Looking to the future and open to discussing possible solutions | The Prospect is open to consider the benefits of making a change including a move to Senior Housing. |  
• Clarify Prospect goals. Don’t assume that signs of readiness mean they’re ready to take action.  
• Summarize the situation and elicit what they may want to do. Offer to resolve stated obstacles.  
• Suggest options and encourage small steps. Get a commitment for something.  
• Solicit collaboration with family/friends. |
| **Stage 4 – Action**  
Choosing “Where” to move |  
• Issue is “Where” to move  
• Seeks information about your community: “Tell me more about . . .”  
• Anxiety and possibility of a relapse increases when decisions become “real” | The Prospect makes a commitment – hopefully to move into your community. |  
• Praise the decision to move - somewhere.  
• Provide information about you Product/Service package.  
• Value Match prospect needs to what your community offers.  
• Ask for a commitment and offer to assist with any perceived barriers. |