

Rising Consciousness

Typical Steps People Take in Recognizing the Need to Work for Fundamental Social Change

We are all born ignorant and must learn how our world works. As we grow up, we are misinformed with many myths that distort our view of our society and of ourselves. Below is a table that shows the steps that people often take as they decipher the myths and learn about alternative ways to live. Sometimes these steps occur sequentially in neat steps in the order listed, but usually they happen in many small, intertwining steps too complex to chart — just like all of life.

Step	Societal Myths to Overcome	Mythical or Partial Solutions	Revealed Truth	Real Solutions	Typical Aids to Learning
1. Empowerment — Steps toward personal empowerment					
a. Get it together	“It’s so difficult to get a job and make ends meet. Life is overwhelming.”	Pretend there is nothing wrong Wait for a handout Numb out with food, drugs, sex, etc.	“It’s possible to make it. I can take care of myself.”	Learn the basics — how to read, how to interact with others, how to get a job Overcome emotional problems	School Family support Social service agencies
b. Realize your oppression/exploitation	“It’s my fault I’m in the predicament I’m in — I’m stupid, I’m incompetent, I’m evil.”	Pretend there is nothing wrong Try harder, read self-help books	“I’m not bad, I’m oppressed/exploited.”	Realize you are OK Learn how you are oppressed or exploited	Discussion groups Individual or group therapy/ self-help books
c. Begin to act	“You can’t fight City Hall.”	Whine and complain Learn to accept the status quo	“I can do something about it.”	Challenge the status quo, build alternatives, support change groups	Role models Social change organizations
d. Devote yourself to change	“I don’t have time. It’s too hard.”	Give up, learn to accept the status quo	“Social change is important. It’s worth spending time on it. Society is constructed so that no one ever has the time to work for change.”	Change your life to free up time, ask for help and support from others, find a job doing social change	Supportive family or friends Social change organizations
2. Community Development — Steps toward building cooperation with others to bring about change					
a. Reach out	“I can do it all.”	Ignore others	“Changing our society will take more than one person.”	Seek out others	Peace, justice, environmental, etc. organizations
b. Empathize with and understand others	“Everyone else is stupid, incompetent.” “Everyone else is wrong, and I’m right.”	Ignore others Impose your will on others	“Other people are oppressed too.” “Others have valuable knowledge and skills. Life is complex — there are multiple truths.”	Be open to others’ perspectives, find out what they are doing and why, synthesize all relevant truths	Cooperative meetings Workshops
c. Cooperate with others	“Other people are weird and difficult to be around.”	Avoid other people or try to control them	“Other people are mostly like me even though they are different. I can work with them. I can accept and celebrate their differences without it diminishing me.”	Be open to diversity, build cooperative organizations, learn good ways to resolve conflicts	Workshops

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3. Political Education — Steps toward a deep understanding of the political economy (including social and cultural aspects)					
a. Learn the fundamentals of how society works	“It’s all very confusing.”	Blindly follow authorities	“Voting for leaders is more democratic than anointing kings.” “This is how a bill gets passed in Congress. This is how the President is elected.”	Learn how the government and economy work	Civics classes, etc. Pamphlets from the League of Women’s Voters, and other civic groups
b. Grow disillusioned	“The authorities do their best to take care of things.” “The invisible hand of free enterprise will efficiently allocate resources.”	Be apathetic Support authorities: church or political leaders, the police, business	“Some authorities are not working in good faith for our benefit.” “Our economic system allows/forces some people to be homeless on the streets.”	Take responsibility for society	Conventional news media
c. Identify the systemic nature of power	“We can vote out of office corrupt or stupid authorities and elect people who will steer us to a good society.” “Some people are lazy and just want a handout.”	Discuss with your neighbors Vote for change Support good-government measures and sanctions against the poor	“The political/economic system helps the powerful to become more powerful, the rich to become richer, and the poor and powerless to get even poorer and more powerless.” “Party bosses and other powerful interests control who gets onto the ballot and massive advertising usually determines who gets elected.”	Implement electoral reform, progressive taxes, and other checks on power	Progressive and alternative magazines and books, social change groups
d. Identify the power elite	“Interests like labor unions, racial minorities, the poor, and their liberal supporters control the government, the schools, and other institutions. Big government thwarts business.” <i>or</i> “Right-wing religious nuts control the government.” <i>or</i> “We all control our society.”	Support conservatives and business leaders <i>or</i> Support moderate liberals <i>or</i> Acknowledge your own complicity in creating society’s problems	“Interests like the military-industrial complex, the oil industry, and the tobacco industry dominate the government, the schools, and the economy. Large churches and business dominate our culture. This power elite is, in turn, largely controlled by a few hundred thousand people, mostly rich, white men.”	Eliminate all concentrations of power and money Establish participatory democracy and universal empowerment	Progressive and alternative magazines and books, social change groups
e. Realize that oppression/exploitation is intentional	“Large powerful interests inadvertently crush people as they rumble forward by inertia. We must regulate and restrain them.”	Support individual rights and government regulation	“In a system based on cut-throat competition, each person or group has a vested interest in crushing every other person or group. In order to maintain their power and privilege, those at the top actively work to thwart progressive change.”	Change economic, social, and political systems so they encourage compassion and cooperation, not competition	Progressive and alternative magazines and books, social change groups
f. Visualize alternatives	“This is the best system we could have. It could be even worse.” “The only possible alternatives are free-market capitalism and totalitarian socialism. Clearly the former is better.”	Be apathetic, support our money-centered system	“There are many ways for human beings to organize their lives and their interactions. A cooperative, people-oriented system would be far preferable to current society.”	Create a new people-oriented society with cooperative institutions that support the common good	Utopian novels Model cooperatives and other alternative institutions

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