

Dealing with transitions

Change. For many of us, the mere mention of the word increases our anxiety and sparks hidden fears that have been buried beneath the comfort of daily routine. Change forces us to adapt to our environment, to abandon our fixed set of assumptions about ourselves, work, society, relationships and often the very meaning of our lives.



Change

Change may or may not be within our control. Examples of life changes include:

- Natural disasters
- Job losses
- Company mergers
- New jobs
- Goals set by others
- Death of a loved one
- Birth of a child
- A spouse's affair
- Becoming disabled
- Moving

Whatever the reason or cause, change disrupts our life, forcing us to alter routines, explore new ideas, learn new skills and think differently. The important idea to remember is that although we cannot always control the changes that take place in our lives, we can be in charge of how we cope with the events surrounding us.

With any change there is a transition process. This transition time is the emotional processing of our individual experiences and reactions caused by the external change. We begin this transition process when we acknowledge to ourselves that the end of something is occurring. Even when we welcome change there are losses to be acknowledged and feelings of grief to share for the way things used to be.

This process of transition has three main stages:

- Ending
- Neutral zone
- Beginning

The transition process allows us time to abandon old assumptions and build new coping skills. Sound scary? It doesn't have to be. Helen Keller once said, "The best way out of it is always through it." It is the energy we use to avoid the process or transition time that often causes increased feelings of stress and leaves us emotionally vulnerable.

Ending

Ending involves loss. Our management of change depends first upon our ability to recognise what we have lost and then grieve that loss. When people grieve, common feelings they experience are: shock, denial, anger, depression, understanding and finally acceptance. In our lifetime we will experience a variety of losses, such as:

- The loss of belonging. "There are so many new faces at work, I just don't fit in here anymore."
- The loss of turf. "They removed me from the project I worked on for eight months, just like it didn't matter at all what I did."
- The loss of future. "I've worked here for 15 years. I always thought if I worked hard I'd eventually be promoted up the line."
- The loss of structure. "I'm not sure who's in charge anymore or how to decide what is top priority."
- The loss of meaning. "I don't understand why this is happening to me. Nothing matters anymore, so why try?"
- The loss of control. "They gave me this job, set the goals too high and now it's not working out. What's going to happen to me next?"

Neutral zone

The second stage of this transition process is often referred to as the Neutral Zone. During this time we feel a void between the old and the new. A sense of emptiness and the attitude of taking one day, or one hour, at a time is a common one. A typical response when asked by others what their plans are is a vague, 'I don't know.' This is a time when people begin to question their personal values, the meaning of their life and often experience (sometimes for the first time) doubt of their own self-worth. This is a time that forces us to look beyond our identities that have been built upon specific skills or titles, such as: supervisor, mother, spouse, manager, driver, etc. This is a time of letting go of how things used to be.

Beginning

The sense of a new Beginning will come with your understanding and acceptance of the changes that have occurred. You will begin to feel in charge of your life.

Seeing the change as a new beginning offers us hope, excitement, stimulation, personal growth and new directions, and will eventually provide us with a new sense of comfort, familiar routine and the feeling that we belong where we have chosen to be.

This process of transition means making your emotions work for you — not against you. Some steps to help you grieve your loss, reexamine your values and begin anew are:

- Let go of old rules which do not reflect the reality of the situation you face.
- Separate fact from opinion.
- Suspend judgment.

- Identify irrational assumptions that increase your fears, i.e., “Asking for help is a sign of weakness and lack of control.”
- Develop rational arguments that challenge your beliefs, i.e., “Every person has limitations. Asking for and accepting help is the most effective way to get what I want or need to learn this new task.”
- Face your fear. In her book *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway*, Susan Jeffers, Ph.D., suggests that in times of change individuals should recognise: “Not only am I going to experience fear whenever I’m on unfamiliar territory, but so is everyone else” and “Pushing through fear is less frightening than living with the underlying fear that comes from a feeling of helplessness.”
- Increase your ability to identify your emotions accurately. If you’re sad or scared, don’t act mad. Acknowledge the hurt.
- Turn the words, “I can’t” and “I have to” into “I want to,” “I will,” and “I can.”
- Stop worrying about what others may think. This is a time for you to reevaluate what is important to you. Stay away from people who are eager to see the negative of any given situation.
- If three to six months have gone by and you are still stuck in self-defeating behaviours that cause you conflict at home and work, get professional help.

Adapting

The key to adapting to change, whether minor or major, is to allow yourself to experience the entire range of emotions and the process of Ending, Neutral Zone and Beginning. Keep in mind that you can be the source, rather than the receptacle, of things that happen in your life. Ask yourself these three questions to get started:

- “Where am I going?”
- “What are my options?”
- “How will I get there?”

Establish small action steps to reach the goals you set for yourself, make a personal plan for taking care of yourself, set realistic timelines and reward yourself as you move through the mental, physical and emotional process of adapting to change.



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