



# FAMILY

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## Transitions and Changes: Practical Strategies

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### Quick Facts...

Transitions and the disruption involved challenge people to concentrate on today and the moment.

Seeing life's changes as being like changing seasons can help.

Many people fail to realize that every transition begins with an ending.

Learning how to finish "unfinished business" with the past and developing supportive relationships are important to well-being.

It's not what happens, but what one chooses to think about it, that affects one's feelings and behaviors.

Life is a series of frequent changes. Some changes are welcomed; others range from inconvenient to catastrophic.

There is a difference between changes and transitions. Change is situational; transition is psychological. It's not the events outside us that make the transition; it's the inner-reorientation and meaning-redefinition we make to incorporate those changes.

Transitions are times of crossing or traveling from something old and familiar to something new and unfamiliar. Most transitions are small and pass by almost unnoticed. Some, however, involve major disruptions in routines and force us to re-examine our values and lifestyle.

Transitions range from changes that affect everyone (social/technological advances and natural disasters) to more personal transitions that affect one's career and relationships. They may be voluntary, like moving to a larger home, or involuntary, like an accident, a disability or an illness. They may be predictable or unpredictable. Transitions and their disruption challenge us to grow and sometimes even force us to concentrate on today and the present moment.

By examining the past, you can recall transition-making strengths you developed and uncover any unfinished business that may now prevent you from being your best. To handle present and future transitions, use the insights gained from past and newly acquired skills.

Fact sheet 10.215, *Transitions and Changes: Who Copes Well?*, examines the characteristics of people who seem to handle transitions well (survivors of political revolutions, migrations, the farm crisis, Nazi concentration camps, the Vietnam War, disability, cancer and depression victims). The roles that perception and meaning play in coping with transitions also are discussed (Antonovsky, 1979, 1987; Fetsch & Jacobsen, 2006; Justice, 1987).

### "Unfinished Business"

When accepting a new job, moving to a different home, or finding a new partner, too often we rush to make a new beginning. We plunge into a new situation only to find ourselves frustrated, lonely, tired, resentful, or preoccupied with unfinished business from the past. We move to a different community but our minds are filled with old information: where our favorite gas station was, when the doughnut shop was open, and how to stay close to our best friend who no longer lives a short distance away. Our culture lacks formal rites of passage to recognize passage from one situation to another.

At one time or another, most of us have difficulty making transitions. Even positive changes can be fraught with difficulty in letting go of the past. Often we feel uncomfortable with change. A favorite way of dealing with our discomfort is avoidance. Avoiding uncomfortable feelings, however, establishes

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patterns that stand in the way of making new beginnings. When we refuse to accept a transition, when the fear of what lies ahead prevents us from moving forward, we appear to stand still on life's busy road while life speeds past.

People who have unresolved transitions have at least three choices:

1. Do nothing and continue to hold onto unpleasant, negative feelings.
2. Squarely face the old business and handle unresolved feelings and needs.
3. Relate old experiences to similar present experiences.

For example, a woman who never felt appreciated by her late father visualizes her father able to express appreciation. This enables her to ask for and accept appreciation from others.

Unfinished feelings can be positive or negative. For example, one 58-year-old man still feels disappointed about his dad's refusal to support him financially in college 40 years ago. Another man fondly remembers his eighth-grade teacher and repeatedly wishes he could tell her how much he appreciates all she taught him. The positive or negative "unfinished business" from the past prevents us from completing today's transitions.

While positive memories are one of life's special joys, dwelling too much in the past, or wishing we had done something differently, prevents us from fully living and loving in the present. The goal is not to discard cherished memories, but to address and resolve unfinished business. When too much unfinished business accumulates, we lose the sparkle and optimism which is every human being's birthright. On the other hand, the ability to make transitions successfully frees up precious energy for living more fully in the here and now.

## The Transition Process

William Bridges, in *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, lists three stages of transition. The first stage is fall. We see grass turn brown and leaves fall, which means another year is coming to a close. The second stage, winter, comes when the soil lies fallow and uncultivated. This is a time for quiet and waiting. The world around us appears lifeless, dead, or in hibernation. When spring — the third stage — arrives, green leaves re-emerge from the dry brown twigs of winter. The earth bursts forth again with life. If we view changes in our lives like the changing seasons, we can feel more comfortable with transitions.

As seasons seldom change overnight, rarely does a person move smoothly from one phase to another. Some transitions, like puberty and aging, happen gradually. Other transitions, like passing the test for a driver's license, occur in an instant. However, there usually is considerable overlap and see-sawing back and forth between the new and the old. We need to take time to adjust to the new identity offered by change. Each person's progression is unique to individual circumstances and abilities.

Every transition begins with an ending. Even positive life changes can be difficult without proper endings. Before we embrace the new, we must let go of the old. "Endings are the first, not the last, act of the play" (Bridges, 2004, p. 132). Once we say goodbye and let go, we may experience a winter-like time. We feel lost, empty or numb—as seemingly lifeless as winter. When we allow ourselves to experience our new feelings fully, we move into the springtime of our transition and make a new beginning.

**Fall transition** is a time to break old patterns. At this stage we say farewell to familiar people, places and routines.

- When you face a particularly difficult transition, experiment with participating in a ritual that helps you close the door on the past and open the door to your future. One in seven American householders moved in 1999 (U.S. Census Bureau). When you're faced with a

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move from a long-time dwelling, have a going away party.

- Ask yourself, “How do I want to say goodbye to each person, situation, place, or event that has been important to me?” Then say goodbye and let go.
- Surrender: Give in to your feelings of loss. Stop striving to avoid them. Frequently, it is only through death that rebirth can occur.
- What is it time to let go of in my life now?

**Winter transition** brings feelings of emptiness, numbness, and confusion. At this stage we often aren't connected yet to the new and aren't yet disconnected from the past.

- Increase your self-awareness. Learn about yourself. Spend time alone. Read inspirational books. Participate in a support, therapy, or special interest group.
- Make regular time to be alone. Use your time constructively. Allow yourself to experience what you feel (loneliness, anger, depression, sadness, peace, strength). If possible, share your feelings with a trusted friend or counselor. Start a log, journal or autobiography. Avoid “keeping busy” to run away from emotional pain. Pain can show us what we need to do to grow.
- Retreat to a neutral zone for a few days. Pick a place free from interruptions. Eat simply. Jot down your thoughts in a notebook. Consider what in your life is currently unlivable.
- Take advantage of the winter period. Something good comes from everything that happens. Often, seeing the good takes time. Learn to look at life's transitions as a loss and a gain. For example, a new move means leaving friends and the familiar — a loss for anyone. The gain is the opportunity to make new friends, see new places, have a yard sale, let go of unnecessary things, reorganize closets and drawers, etc. The winter period is a time of searching for these gains.

**Spring transition** means letting go of the old relationship, situation or event and making a new beginning. As spring leaves bud and flowers bloom, you, too, will find new energy to make a new beginning.

- Give yourself time alone. What do you need now? What is waiting in the back of your mind to begin? Who would you like to be? What would you like to do in the time you have remaining? Visualize your future unfolding the way you want.
- Accept that past achievements can no longer be the standard for satisfaction in the present. Don't cling to old identities, roles and routines if they no longer meet your needs. Focus on today and all that you can enjoy and accomplish before tomorrow.
- Set realistic short- and long-term goals for yourself. When you know what kind of changes to expect and what you cannot predict, you are more likely to set realistic yet flexible goals. Start today to realize your dreams of who you want to be and what you want to do.
- Reward yourself for your progress. Give yourself healthy treats and pats on the back. Seek supportive, positive companionship. Compliments and encouragement are invaluable for avoiding past ruts and for making new beginnings.

Learn to notice and experience the changing seasons of your life from fall (making endings) to winter (experiencing your pain) to spring (making new beginnings). You will feel a renewed energy, a renewed hope, and a renewed desire to grow and give to others.

## Successful Transitions: Practical Strategies

From the research on how resilient people successfully manage transitions (see fact sheet 10.215, *Transitions and Changes: Who Copes Well?*), you can arrive at some practical conclusions.

- Develop supportive relationships at work and home. The value of good friends is hard to over-emphasize. Research suggests that people with friends to rely on during stressful times experience fewer of the negative effects of high stress levels. They also remain healthier, are more successful and live longer.
- Examine your work environment. Think about what you like. Bring the ideas and habits that worked well for you in the past to a new job. Avoid ruts you fell into. Change what you can of the things you don't like about your job and environment and practice accepting what you cannot change (Fersch, 1992).
- Take time to take good care of yourself. Eat a balanced diet. Exercise. Get plenty of rest. Take time to relax with friends and family. A high rate of change often means extra stress and strain on your body. Pay attention—What does your body/mind/soul need now?
- Build self-esteem. You are a unique individual, with special talents and interests. Make a list of what you like most about yourself and what you appreciate about each family member. Encouraging others to feel good about themselves is a wonderful way to feel good about ourselves. Give each family member a sincere compliment every day.
- Be open and flexible. Most people are eager to settle into comfortable routines. Know that your present routine is only temporary. Something may happen at any time that can force you to change your routine. You may not be able to predict change, but knowing that change can happen at any time helps you accept and adjust when it does occur. Most life transitions are slow processes that take time.
- Keep your “sunny side” up. Concentrate on the good things in life. Don't dwell on negative thoughts. A positive attitude helps you feel good about yourself and the life you live, and goes a long way towards improving your health.
- Take control of your life. What can you do now to help you through a difficult transition in your future? Practice finding the good in each of life's transitions. It's not what happens to you that causes you to respond the way you do, but how you choose to react to what happens. Take charge of your thoughts and actions and you will be able to control better how you respond.
- Use resources available to you. In addition to dollars, self-help publications (Bridges, 2004; Latner, 1973; Vickio, 1990), skills, time and information, other resources include good friends, loving family members, special talents and abilities (such as a positive attitude, good health, and an appreciation of the beauty around you). These resources can help you through life's transitions. Learn to recognize and use them.

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