

What It's Like...

Being in Transition

The amount and pace of change in today's world can leave us feeling disoriented, "up in the air" or "in flux". But "the change" is not the same as "the transition". Change is situational: the new site, the new residence, the new relationship. Transition is the psychological process that we each go through in order to come to terms with the new situation.

In order to cope with change we develop routines that allow us to work within particular structures and provide a sense of stability and security. These normal routines give a sense of purpose, direction, and opportunities for fulfillment and achievement.

In fact, there are biochemical, psychological, and historical factors determining that virtually everyone is resistant to change. Whereas mild resistance can create preoccupation, tension, and distraction; staunch resistance to change can result in inflexibility, rigid thinking, poor decision-making, impaired physical and emotional health, and strained relationships.

Many external factors (eg: life transitions and relationship or job loss) disrupt our normal routines. As a result, we experience heightened emotions including frustration, anger, anxiety, and at times, depression. While these are normal daily emotions, sometimes the emotions linger and become more entrenched. Entrenched feelings need to be challenged.

When worried or anxious, we interpret external events and situations in a negative, catastrophic manner. Partly this is due to our nature but frequently we are fearful of abandoning our particular comfort zone and tackling new demands with the implications they raise for us. Martin Seligman, a psychologist known for his work on anxiety and depression, has written:

Anxiety is your mental tongue. Its default mode is to search for what may be about to go wrong. It continually, and without your conscious consent, scans your life - yes, even when you are asleep, in dreams and nightmares. It reviews your work, your love, your play - until it finds an imperfection. When it finds one, it worries it. It tries to pull it out from its hiding place, where it is wedged inconspicuously under some rock. It will not let go.

Every transition begins with an "ending". That ending kick-starts the psychological process of coming to terms with the change. The ending normally is filled with feelings of grief and loss, of anger and unfairness, or "Why me?" or "Why us?" Wrestling with these feelings throws us into a "free fall", leaving us with a sense of instability and uncertainty. However, in time the free fall begins to suggest possibilities, options and choices. The decisions each of us makes regarding these choices solidify the change and end the psychological process of this specific transition until the next change arrives.



The positive side of anxiety and worry is that they normally propel us into some form of action. For example, fear of failure or embarrassment can motivate us to spend extra time in preparation and planning. They can drive us to search for alternatives and to mentally rehearse various optional courses of action. The trick is to know when to listen to our emotions and their messages and when to take appropriate steps to relieve the free-floating and persistent distress that impacts our health and well-being.

What Do We Know About Transitions & Change?

- Adjusting to change takes time. Change can come so fast that we do not have time to process all that is required of us. It is a process and a progression.
- Change can be difficult. Usually with anything difficult come feelings of awkwardness, doubt, loss, anxiety, and struggle. Excessive tension can result in depression.
- Change is a highly personal experience. No matter how many people are impacted, we feel alone. We compare ourselves with others to see how we are coping.
- People require support and clear expectations. The clearer the expectations, the more likely the change will be supported. Offer whatever support you can to others who are impacted.
- Managing change requires self-care. Taking care of ourselves gives us a sense of strength and confidence, however fragile initially. A self-care regimen includes healthy eating, exercise and walking, seeing friends, staying connected, helping others etc. The ability to recognize and celebrate our efforts, no matter how small, helps us to move through the transition process.

Some Self-Care Responses While We're in Transition

Getting physical. Exercise need not be vigorous to relieve stress but it is important to use muscles other than those used during work.

Mindfulness. Consciously make the effort to practice mindfulness: being in the moment, without judgement, being curious without expectations, enjoying the safety, the beauty, and affirmation this moment affords me.

Focusing & visualizing. Taking short breaks and letting my imagination roam freely, daydreaming about positive events, and allowing myself some wishful thinking.

Listening to Music. Listening with my eyes closed and letting my imagination explore.

Breathing. Stepping away from my work activity and breathing slowly but deeply. Restoring the body's oxygen supply helps it to regain its ability to relax.

Creating. Distress can be countered by creative responses. Painting, woodworking, etc - no one method works for everyone. Find something you like to do and "Just do it".

Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow; it only saps today of its strength. - A. J. Cronin