

Mental Health News

Managing Difficult Life Transitions

By *Herb Cantor*

Life is a process of beginnings and endings. In both life and nature, there are times when things move slowly and don't seem to change very much. Then, suddenly, things change quickly. Moving from August to September, the weather changes gradually at first, and then it seems that suddenly summer is over. It is the same in our lives; transitions are as natural as the changing seasons.

Life transitions are challenging because they force us to let go of the familiar and face the future with a feeling of vulnerability. Most life transitions begin with a string of losses:

- The loss of a role
- The loss of a person
- The loss of a place
- The loss of your sense of where you fit in the world

Any significant loss makes most people feel fearful and anxious. Since your future may now be filled with questions, it is normal to feel afraid. We live in a culture that has taught us to be very uncomfortable with uncertainty, so we are anxious when our lives are disrupted. On the positive side, these transitions give us a chance to learn about our strengths and to explore what we really want out of life. This time of reflection can result in a sense of renewal, stability, and a new equilibrium.

A life transition can be positive or negative, planned or unexpected. Some transitions happen without warning, and they may be quite dramatic, as in cases of accidents, death, divorce, job loss, or serious illness. Other life transitions come from positive experiences such as getting married, going away to college, starting a new job, moving to a new city, or giving birth to a child. Even though events like these are usually planned and anticipated, they can be just as life-altering as the unexpected events. Whether positive or negative, life transitions cause us to leave behind the familiar and force us to adjust to new ways of living, at least temporarily. They can leave us feeling completely unprepared and we may be thrown into a personal crisis, feeling shocked, angry, sad, and withdrawn.

Examples of Life Transitions

Life transitions can include any of the following:

- Accidents
- Buying a house

- Changing jobs
- Divorce
- Getting married
- Having a baby
- Leaving for college
- Relocation
- Retirement
- Selling a house
- Serious illness
- Significant loss (of a person, job, pet, or anything important)
- Starting a career

Stages of Life Transitions

Successfully moving through a life transition usually means experiencing the following stages:

1. Experience a range of negative feelings (anger, anxiety, confusion, numbness, self-doubt).
2. Feel a loss of self-esteem.
3. Begin to accept the change.
4. Acknowledge that you need to let go of the past and accept the future.
5. Begin to feel hopeful about the future.
6. Feel increased self-esteem.
7. Develop an optimistic view of the future.

The process of moving through a transition does not always proceed in order, in these nice, predictable stages. People usually move through the process in different ways, often cycling back and forth among the stages.

Coping Skills

Life transitions are often difficult, but they have a positive side, too. They provide us with an opportunity to assess the direction our lives are taking. They are a chance to grow and learn. Here are some ideas that may help make the process rewarding.

Accept that change is a normal part of life. People who have this attitude seem to have the easiest time getting through life transitions. Seeing changes as negative or as experiences that must be avoided makes them more difficult to navigate and less personally productive.

Identify your values and life goals. If a person knows who they are and what they want from life, they may see the change as just another life challenge. These people are willing to take responsibility for their actions and do not blame others for the changes that come along without warning.

Learn to identify and express your feelings. While it's normal to try to push away feelings of fear and anxiety, you will move through them more quickly if you acknowledge them. Make them real by writing them down and talking about them with trusted friends and family members. These feelings will have less power over you if you face them and express them.

Focus on the payoffs. Think about what you have learned from other life transitions. Recall the stages you went through, and identify what you gained and learned from each experience. Such transitions can provide a productive time to do some important self-exploration. They can be a chance to overcome fears and to learn to deal with uncertainty. These can be the gifts of the transition process: to learn more about yourself and what makes you happy and fulfilled.

Don't be in a rush. When your life is disrupted, it takes time to adjust to the new reality. Expect to feel uncomfortable during a transition as you let go of old ways of doing things. Try to avoid starting new activities too soon, before you have had a chance to reflect and think about what is really best for you.

Expect to feel uncomfortable. A time of transition is confusing and disorienting. It is normal to feel insecure and anxious. These feelings are part of the process, and they will pass.

Stay sober. Using alcohol or drugs during this confusing time is not a good idea. It can only make the process more difficult.

Take good care of yourself. Transitions are very stressful, even if they are supposed to be happy times. You may not feel well enough to participate in your normal activities. Find something fun to do for yourself each day. Get plenty of rest, exercise, and eat well.

Build your support system. Seek the support of friends and family members, especially those who accept you without judging you and encourage you to express your true feelings. A time of transition is also an excellent time to seek the support of a mental health professional. He or she can guide you through the transition process in a safe and supportive environment.

Acknowledge what you are leaving behind. This is the first step to accepting the new. Think about how you respond to endings in your life: Do you generally avoid them, like the person who ducks out early on her last day on the job because she can't bear to say good-bye? Or do you drag them out because you have such a hard time letting go? Perhaps you make light of endings, refusing to let yourself feel sad. Before you can welcome the new, you must acknowledge and let go of the old.

Keep some things consistent. When you are experiencing a significant life change, it helps to keep as much of your daily routine consistent as you can.

Accept that you may never completely understand what has happened to you. You are likely to spend a lot of time feeling confused and afraid. This makes most of us very uncomfortable. The discomfort and confusion will pass, and clarity will return.

Take one step at a time. It's understandable to feel like your life has become unmanageable. To regain a sense of power, find one small thing you can control right now. Then break it down into small, specific, concrete steps. Write them down and post them on your computer monitor or mirror. Cross off each step as you accomplish it.

Times of life transitions offer you the chance to explore what your ideal life would look like. When things are in disarray, you can reflect on the hopes and dreams you once had but perhaps forgot about. Take this time to write about them in a journal or talk about them with a trusted friend or therapist. Now is a good time to take advantage of the fork in the road.

Herb Cantor is a licensed psychologist in Northfield, PA. He has been in private practice since 1987 and specializes in helping people through major life changes, including chronic illness. Call 555-1234 for your free, one-hour consultation.