

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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Letting Go of the Old and Embracing the New Is the Secret to Self-Renewal During Times of Change

Change is an inevitable part of life. Transitions are as natural as night and day. In nature we observe times when things move slowly without visible change – and then suddenly acceleration occurs followed by a transformation. Tree leaves that have been green all summer suddenly turn red and gold and within a short time are blown to the ground, the tree's branches left bare. In the spring the process begins again. Within this cycle of change, we must deal with both endings and beginnings.

Life transitions are predictable changes associated with a discontinuity from the past. With each change we must give up the structures that protect us and then face the world anew with a sense of fragility and vulnerability. These disruptive times may test the limits of our ability to adapt.

However, with each transition we have the opportunity to learn a great deal about our inner resources and to ask ourselves what we really want out of life. This period of self-reflection can then lead to self-renewal and a new phase of stability and eventual equilibrium.

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Sometimes life thrusts change upon us dramatically and unexpectedly. Disabling accidents, the deaths of loved ones, divorce, the loss of a job, a major illness – all of these events mean that we must leave something behind and then adjust to a new way of living, even if we feel totally unprepared to do so. These events can strike without warning and leave us struggling with a personal crisis characterized by denial, anger, depression and withdrawal. But not all transitions arise from negative experiences. Marriage, a new job, a move to a new location, the birth of a child, reacquaintance with an old friend – these events, which may be planned and expected, may also lead us into a life transition.

On other occasions, life transitions occur because we find ourselves in a rut. We may have the nagging feeling that something is wrong, although we can't quite put our finger on the reasons. Our lives are not going the way we thought they would, and time is passing us by. We feel that it is time for a major change. This can happen at any time, but it is most common during what Gail Sheehy has called the "predictable crises of adult life" which often accompany our decade changes (that is, our twenties, our thirties, our mid-life years, older stages of life...)

As William Bridges points out in his book, *Transitions*, our life transitions are composed of an ending, a "neutral zone," and a new beginning. When a transition occurs, we need to give up our old definitions of the world, our old ways of doing things, as we are challenged by the process of "letting go." Endings are difficult for most people, even when we are unhappy with the way things used to be. What is known is more comfortable than the unknown. Once we let go, however, we enter a period of feeling disconnected from the past but not yet connected to the present – the neutral zone. This is a time that can engender great self-reflection, an assessment of what we really want out of life, and a time to reorient ourselves toward the future. Finally, the new beginning completes the successful transition. This is when we embark on a journey of new priorities and the sense of a renewed future.

Bringing Our Old Situation to an End

Most of us try to avoid endings – and this may be surprising since endings occur throughout the entire life cycle. Some people mistakenly deal with the task of letting go by clinging tenaciously to their old ways of living, forgetting that submitting to loss is a necessary condition for entering into a period of self-renewal. Think of the parent who is not able to let the children grow up and live independent lives. This situation can cause substantial conflict, both for the children and the parent. People sometimes think that if they can hold on to their old ways, they can avoid the pain of change – but in real-

ity more pain results from holding on. In contrast, other people deal with the difficulty of endings by dismissing the old as if it didn't count. These are the people who see a therapist and announce that they are not interested in looking at the past and want to focus only on the present and future. They fail to recognize that we need closure on the past, a true appreciation of the life lessons we have accumulated from our histories, before we can continue with a productive transition. Refusing to look at the past is one way of allowing the past to continue to haunt us – and a condition which makes moving on difficult. A successful transition takes courage.

Bridges has identified four stages of the ending process.

Disengagement – We need to make a break from the roles, activities, and settings of the former situation. Until this break occurs, we are prone to seeing the world in the old way, and this makes a successful transition difficult. Disengagement does not necessarily mean physically leaving or moving – as long as one can psychologically disengage from a situation, one can gain the perspective to begin to define the old ways more objectively.

Disidentification – Not only do our activities change, but we begin to give up our former self-definitions. A person in the so-called mid-life crisis, for example, needs to abandon his or her identity as a "younger" person. To avoid this change is to postpone the inevitable, to invite continuing inner conflict, and to forego the advantages of moving into a different stage of life.

Disenchantment – Once our situations and our former self-definitions change, we may wonder about what is real and what is not. In a sense the world is made up of many levels of reality. Our old lives helped us to create one way of looking at things – our old reality ("This relationship is for life," or "I'll always have this job," or "My health will last forever"). Disenchantment occurs when we are no longer under the spell of the old reality. We question our assumptions and begin to see the world in new ways, to look at other levels of reality. This opens the door to a healthy transition.

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Disorientation – This is a stage of discomfort. Our old situations, self-definitions, and views of reality have been challenged, and we are left confused with the feeling that we have jumped into the void. We get by everyday by taking things a step at a time. Things that we had once thought were meaningful are no longer so. We all have a tendency to hope that things are constantly improving throughout our lives, but it may be more realistic to view things as they occur in the natural world – a series of expansions and contractions. We gain and we lose. Day becomes night – and then day again. We need to empty our cupboards before we can fill them up again.

The Inner Work of the Neutral Zone

Other societies provide in their transition rituals some ways of dealing with the neutral zone. For example, the vision quest, where the person goes into the wilds alone in search of answers that may come intuitively, is a way in which some Native American tribes provide a transition between childhood and adulthood. Lacking such rituals in our society, we may not know what to do with the neutral zone. We may feel lost, confused, and disoriented, and may show symptoms of depression. This time of confusion, however, can set the stage for self-examination and answers which guide us out of the transitional phase and into the future. The neutral zone is a period of personal reorientation.

Nothing much happens in the neutral zone, at least from the outsider's perspective. People in the neutral zone often say that they need a few days, or even longer, alone just to think – or pray or medi-

Some people try to initiate a beginning before they accomplish the work of the ending, mainly because endings can be painful. For example, they may try to find a new relationship before putting closure on the old one. This creates a situation where the old structures, the old realities, are still in place and it blocks us from doing the work associated with a healthy transition into a new relationship. Before finding a new relationship, it is preferable to spend some time alone, think about what the old relationship meant and what was wrong with it, as well as to assess what this stage of life can now bring. To do this, we must confront the challenge of the ending and then move into the neutral zone. A life of integrity demands nothing less.

tate. Without the old definitions of the world and our accustomed activities to fall back on, time in the neutral zone can create substantial introspection and heightened self-awareness. And out of this primal stew can emerge intuitions and insights, which provide the recipe for the new beginning. This is a time to examine the course of our lives, to reacquaint ourselves with the nature of our inner selves, and to think of ways to make our dreams come true. Renewal arises from an examination of our inner resources.

Embracing a New Life

Genuine new beginnings emerge when we realign our ways of looking at the world and renew our energy. We may mistakenly look for external signs to guide us into a beginning, but our inner attitudes toward life, our renewed self-knowledge, and our intuition are really the hallmarks of our new beginnings. By relying on our inner voice to tell us where to go in life, we are likely to have more motivation than if we were to depend on the traditional expectations provided to us by others. When the directions we must take in life become clear, it is time to take action to make things happen, identify ourselves as traveling on a new course, and then complete the process step by step. New beginnings incorporate some continuity from the past. We never give up the old completely, but use what we need from the past as a resource for our journey into the future.

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Transitions are a natural and inevitable part of life – and because we find comfort in our old familiar ways, they can be difficult. Psychotherapy is an effective way to make the most of our transitions – a way to understand the old, to look inward, and to discover that flame which represents our true inner selves. In therapy, we can then determine the direction of our new beginning.

FOR FURTHER READING ON TRANSITIONS

Bridges, William. *Transitions* (Second Edition). 2004; ISBN: 0-7382-0904-X; \$15.95.

Sheehy, Gail and Joelle Delbourgo (Eds.) *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time*. 1995; ISBN: 0-345-40445-9; \$14.00.

T H E B A C K P A G E

When You Undergo a Life Transition...

Life transitions, difficult as they can be, afford us the opportunity to find our true inner direction and engage in the process of self-renewal. Here are some guidelines to make the journey rewarding.

- 1. Give Yourself Enough Time.** When our lives are disrupted, it takes time to reorient our inner feelings to the new reality. We may feel uncomfortable during a transition, especially when we give up our old activities. To create new activities prematurely, however, without giving ourselves the time to reflect and reorient, may only serve to perpetuate the old ways – and a rewarding life opportunity may be missed.
- 2. Arrange Temporary Ways of Living.** Although transitions can be disruptive, hold on to those parts of your life that provide comfort and security. When we feel safe we are able to accomplish the task of the transition more productively. If your transition involves a job loss, find temporary work until you discover what you want to do over the long run. If you have lost a relationship, there is no need to isolate yourself from all of your friends. Hold on to those who can comfort you.
- 3. Tolerate the Discomfort.** Transitions can introduce confusion and disorientation into our lives. Expect to experience times of anxiety and insecurity. These are natural feelings and an important part of the process, but they are only temporary. Trust in your own ability to see your way through the transition. Above all, realize that using alcohol and drugs will only serve to subvert the process. Face your challenge with integrity.
- 4. Take Care of Yourself During the Transition.** The stress of transitions may wear you down, and you may feel so depressed that you don't want to engage in normal, healthy activities. Do something for yourself everyday that you find comforting and pleasurable. Get a normal amount of sleep and make sure your diet is healthy. If you can, try to get some exercise everyday, even if it is only a walk around the block.
- 5. Find the Support You Need.** A time of transition is an excellent time to seek the support of a trained professional therapist who can guide you through the process in a safe and encouraging setting. Finding the support of friends is also important – but avoid those who are only there to give advice. While advice may be helpful at times, your greater need at this time is to explore your own feelings and to find the truth which emerges from your own inner resources. Therapy provides a safe and productive way to negotiate this part of your life journey.



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