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"Change is not merely necessary to life, it is life." —
Alvin Toffler

Change can take on many forms in all aspects of our lives. Some changes are good, such as getting married, having children, making new friends and buying a car or a home. Others are undesirable, such as losing your job, divorce or death of a loved one. Welcome or not, change can easily disrupt our lives, forcing us to alter our usual routines and even explore different ways of thinking.

Although we cannot always control changes, we are always in charge of how we cope with them. Coping with change, big or small, puts us in a state of transition as we adjust our lives and our thoughts to new situations. In his groundbreaking book, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, William Bridges describes this transition process as three stages:

Saying Goodbye

Every transition begins with an Ending or a loss. It's easy to see endings in a divorce or a job layoff, but even the "good" changes in life can lead to a sense of loss as well. A job promotion requiring longer hours impacts home and family life. Having a new baby can lead to a loss of freedom, as new parents are no longer able to live by their own schedules. At this first stage of transition, we have to let go of the way things used to be — and sometimes the way we used to be.

Shifting into Neutral

Next comes the Neutral Zone, an often confusing, in-between time defined by uncertainty. Laid off workers may have no idea what to do next, and those still at the company may be disoriented by their new job duties. Even happy new homeowners may experience a brief period of "buyer's remorse." While this stage can be distressing, the Neutral Zone is also where real transformation takes place, as it provides the opportunity to re-examine our lives and priorities.

Moving Forward

After we let go of the past and allow ourselves time for re-evaluation, we start to accept the reality of the change

and identify with our new situation. This is the third stage, the New Beginning. And seeing each change as a beginning offers the excitement of trying something new, which can eventually become a familiar, comfortable routine.

Depending on the change, and the person, these transition stages can last from a few days to perhaps months or even years. And despite this simple model, it's not always easy to navigate. Many people are reluctant to let go of old routines. Others become frightened and confused in the Neutral Zone. Some even freeze when they face the New Beginning, unsure how to adjust to different circumstances.

Dealing with the loss, uncertainty and stress of changing situations is difficult for everyone. Here are some ideas and suggestions that can help:

- Remember that change is a part of life. No one is immune to change, and we all go through the same transition process.
- Recognize your feelings. You may feel stressed, sad, empty, confused or lost. These are all normal reactions.
- Know what's really changing. Take time to mourn your losses, but remember that not everything is changing. Find comfort in the things that are still the same.
- Take stock. Take time to look at your priorities and see if they still make sense to you.
- Be optimistic. Look for ways the change can be to your advantage.
- Take care of yourself. Take time to rest and eat well. Exercise can help relieve pent-up feelings and stress. Avoid drugs and alcohol.
- Experiment with changes of your own. Be open to new possibilities. Take an alternative route to work. Try a different kind of food

for lunch. Do something this weekend that you've never done before.

- Talk to someone. Talking about the change with someone usually helps, even if you're not looking for solutions to your situation. Share your doubts and fears as well as your

dreams and ambitions. Be willing to listen to others going through changes as well. If you still find the changes in your life to be too much, consider seeking professional counseling. Asking for help is never a sign of weakness or failure, especially in situations too difficult to handle alone.

Resources

Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes by William Bridges, Ph.D.: offers advice and strategies for dealing with each step of the transition process.

Feel The Fear And Do It Anyway by Susan Jeffers, Ph.D.: suggests ways to conquer the fear that comes with the uncertainty of change.

Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life by Gail Sheehy: shows how to use each life crisis as an opportunity for creative change in order to grow to your full potential. Although we cannot always control changes, we are always in charge of how we cope with them.