

COPING WITH MAJOR LIFE CHANGES

Major life changes such as getting a new boss or having a baby affect all aspects of your life. Whether positive or negative, change can be difficult to adjust to.

“All major changes involve a component of loss at their center,” says Cara DiMarco, Ph.D., a counselor in Oregon and author of *Moving Through Life Transitions With Power and Purpose*. “That loss might involve loss of a particular routine, loss of opportunities, loss of a sense of yourself, or a loss of hope.”

As a result, most people going through major life transitions can expect to feel varying levels of anxiety, stress, confusion, and possibly self-doubt. These feelings should not become persistent, however, but should decrease over time. If they don't ease and your ability to function in daily life becomes significantly impaired, you may need professional help.



Expect disruption

In the vortex of change, many people expect to go on without missing a beat, as if the change were a minor inconvenience. But this attitude isn't realistic. “While it's essential that we're able to be productive in the midst of change, we also need to allow ourselves to not feel fully centered, to not feel absolutely on top of our game,” Dr. DiMarco says.

If you're starting a new job, for instance, and are used to performing at 95 percent, don't expect to be up to speed immediately.

Focus on the known

In the midst of change, “people tend to over-focus on the unknown,” Dr. DiMarco says. “This is only natural, because that's where most of their anxiety lies. But some things you just can't know until you're in the middle of the experience.”

To avoid needless worry and self-doubt about changes at hand, focus on the known elements that are present in the new situation.

Look for meaning

Change disrupts the continuity of life, but even the most difficult and traumatic changes can be useful. “You can learn from every experience,” Dr. DiMarco says. You might have never chosen that life-changing experience or the lesson it taught you about yourself or the world, but if you can find the meaning or valuable outcome behind it, that experience will become part of your internal world, rather than an external agent acting on you.

That mind-set, Dr. DiMarco says, “increases your sense of personal control and power. By extracting something out of change, you can create a sense of mastery.”

Anticipate change

Change is inevitable, so it's helpful to plan for it. “Being prepared allows you to have more options and be aware of potential obstacles,” Dr. DiMarco says.

If you have children in high school, for instance, you know they will soon leave home -- and you'll have more time to yourself.

To establish several game plans for coping with empty-nest syndrome and making good use of your free time, sit down with someone -- a career counselor, personal counselor or trusted friend -- and use the person as a sounding board.

Pinpoint patterns

How do you move through change? What sorts of feelings and reactions tend to consistently recur? “These are the kinds of questions to ask yourself when your life is stable so you can develop your own personal tool kit of coping strategies when change ensues,” Dr. DiMarco says.

HEALTHFUL WAYS TO MANAGE CHANGE



We live in a constantly changing world in these times of potential terrorist attacks, heightened airport security, a boom-bust economy, and rapid-fire technological and scientific advances.

“In this present environment, it can be challenging to retain a sense of control, especially if you’re someone who likes to maintain the status quo,” says psychologist Elizabeth Stirling, Ph.D., a change coach in Santa Fe, N.M.

In general, says Dr. Stirling, it’s more difficult to react to change that happens to you, such as getting laid off or experiencing a health scare. But the change you initiate, such as switching jobs or moving, also can be difficult.

“The unknown is always a little scary,” says Dr. Stirling, especially if you haven’t done a lot of changing previously, or if change wasn’t fostered during your upbringing.

“But personal change can become easier if you adopt a positive attitude and an environment that diminishes the fear of the unknown and heightens your sense of adventure,” she says.

Dr. Stirling offers the following tips for riding the waves of change with your sanity intact.

Solidify your support

To cope with change effectively, align yourself with a group, such as a religious organization, and/or nurture relationships with friends and family members with positive outlooks.

“You need cheerleaders - people who are going to encourage you when change happens,” says Dr. Stirling. “When someone says your new job sounds exciting, your confidence gets a boost.”

Appreciate nature

For general stress relief associated with change, “connect with nature to get a sense of being part of a larger whole,” suggests Dr. Stirling. “Go for a leisurely walk in the park or sit by a river. Experiencing a deep sense of sacredness of all things, like the splendor of a spring day, can ease stress and put your issues into perspective.”

Look on the bright side

With many changes come excitement, a sense of adventure and the opportunity for personal growth. If possible, “tap into the benefits of change,” says Dr. Stirling. “Ask yourself: ‘What will I gain by making this change?’”

Even negative changes offer opportunities for learning.

Overall, “staying positive can help you reach your potential and recover faster from setbacks,” says Dr. Stirling.

But seek psychotherapy if change occurs and you’re chronically anxious about it or stuck in the grieving process after several months.

Flex your change muscles

Change gets easier when you do it often, so force yourself to experience enjoyable change frequently, especially if you haven’t changed much in a while or you feel stuck in a rut. You might, for example, take a different route to work every other week, get involved in a new hobby, or enroll in a class that interests you.

Stay in good physical shape

Before and during times of change, it’s important to stay in good physical shape and not let your eating habits slide.

“Healthy nutrition and regular exercise can help your body support you,” says Dr. Stirling. If you experience a major health setback, for example, you’ll be in a stronger position to recover. And you’ll also feel more psychologically prepared to cope with change.

“By eating healthfully and exercising regularly, you’ll gain a sense of personal control that can translate to the change at hand,” she says.

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