

Coping with Change

Overview

Ways to cope with change.

- Understanding the benefits of change
- Change and stress
- Helpful tips on coping with change

Change is a natural part of life. Most of us are continually making adjustments that reflect our changing needs or interests -- switching majors in school, moving to another city, or adjusting to new co-workers or processes at work.

How you react to a change may depend on the results you think it will bring. You may feel excited about change that involves a gain, such as a promotion or a new baby, but you may worry about a change that involves a loss, such as a divorce or layoff. Accepting a sudden, unexpected change can be a big challenge. You want to have control over the situation and make everything better, but no matter how hard you try, you can't control some things. When you accept the reality that you do not have full control over what happens in life, it becomes easier to cope. The best strategy for coping with change involves focusing on what you can control and letting go of what you can't.

Even if you look forward to a change, adjusting to new realities can be stressful. One key to coping with these kinds of difficulties is to remember that with support, most people can adapt well to change. Depending on the nature of the change you face, you may want to turn to your family or friends, your manager or co-workers, a professional counsellor, or a support group whose members know what you're going through and want to help.

Understanding the benefits of change

Many people have negative reactions when they first hear that they'll be facing a big change. Some people cry or become angry. Others think "It isn't fair," "I'll never be able to handle this," or "I'm too old to learn a new way of doing things." It may help to remember that a change -- even if you don't want it -- can be beneficial. Some of the rewards of change can include the following:

- *It offers a chance to learn and grow.* New experiences can bring greater knowledge and awareness if you allow them to.

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- *It can help you focus on your priorities.* Change can give you a new perspective on yourself and others. Sometimes when you are forced to make choices and decisions, you realize what is most valuable to you.
- *It can bring new opportunities.* Almost every new experience has both advantages and disadvantages. If you don't like certain aspects of a change, you may find that you do like other things about it.
- *It can help you stay flexible.* It's easy to fall into a rut or become "set in your ways." A change in one area of life can help you stay flexible and make other needed changes.
- *It can build self-confidence.* Many experts believe that if people don't change, they don't grow. Staying in a comfortable situation can be fine for a while, but over time, it can become tedious or cause you to lose confidence in your ability to do well at other tasks or in other settings.
- *It can make you grow and make you stronger.* When you accept a change, you can find something positive in it. When you successfully cope with a tough change, it will help you become stronger for the next change.

Change and stress

Although change can be rewarding in the long run, it can seem very stressful at first. Depending on the nature of your adjustment, the difficulties can last anywhere from a few days to several years. There are many different kinds of changes and everyone reacts differently to events. Some people may feel stress because of events that are happy ones, such as a wedding or the birth of a baby. Others may have trouble coping with divorce, controversy at work, or a move. Smaller events that also can bring about change that could cause stress, such as an upcoming holiday, trouble with in-laws, or even a vacation.

Change can be both physically and mentally stressful. As a rule, the larger the change, the more stress you may face. Many people find it particularly difficult to move from one major stage of life to another -- for example, to adjust to leaving school, having a child, reaching midlife, becoming a stepparent or grandparent, or retirement.

Because so many different changes can cause stress, it's important to recognize the signs of stress. The physical and mental symptoms of stress include the following:

- headaches
- depression
- anxiety
- fatigue

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- overeating
- sleep problems
- mood swings
- poor concentration
- stomachaches or other digestive problems
- neck aches or backaches
- alcohol or drug abuse
- eating disorders
- heart trouble
- sexual problems

If you have trouble coping with a change you are undergoing, or if you keep having these symptoms long after a change has occurred, you may want to talk to your health care provider or a counsellor or therapist about ways to cope with stress.

Helpful tips on coping with change

Here are some tips on coping with change.

- *Anticipate change.* Take steps to avoid becoming rigid and afraid of new experiences. Throughout life, keep making friends, exploring a variety of interests and activities, and accepting new challenges at work.
- *Take care of your physical and emotional health.* If you're facing a big change, take extra care to eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, get enough sleep, and limit your alcohol consumption. Make sure to take some breaks and make time to do something you find enjoyable with friends or family.
- *Learn some relaxation techniques.* You might find it helpful to take a yoga class or listen to relaxation recordings, which are available at bookstores, libraries, and online. Or, set aside a few minutes each day (in the morning, at night, or on your lunch hour) to visualize yourself remaining calm.
- *Keep an open mind.* Just because you haven't done something before doesn't mean you won't like it.
- *Stay positive.* Remember, you have a choice as to how you respond to the changes you face. Keeping a positive attitude will help you through the tough times.
- *Take it slow.* Making change is really a series of small transitions. You will find it easier to cope with a big change by breaking it down into small steps so that you can make gradual adjustments over time.

- *Gather information.* The most stressful thing about change may be the uncertainty it brings. To ease your anxieties, learn as much as you can about what you're facing. Do research online or at the library. Talk with friends and co-workers who've faced the same kind of changes you're facing and ask what helped them the most. Or, read a book like *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, Revised 25th Anniversary Edition, by William Bridges, which describes the stages of change and how to deal with them.
- *Identify obstacles.* Just about everyone encounters obstacles that get in the way of change. Take the time to write yours down. It will help you clarify and figure out how to get past the obstacles you may be facing.
- *Limit or "pace" your changes.* Try not to take on a big change before you've adjusted to another one, and avoid trying to make a lot of smaller changes all at once. If you know that you're already experiencing stress, try to postpone making big decisions that will bring about change and, possibly, more stress.
- *Talk about your feelings with people who can help.* Be as specific as you can about your concerns. You might say to your partner, "I've had more responsibilities at work since I've been promoted, and it's become harder for me to make dinner every night. What can we do about this?"
- *Consider joining a support group.* If a change feels too big to handle alone, consider joining a support group for people who are going through a similar experience. You might join a group for stepparents, newcomers to a community, or people who are caring for an older adult with Alzheimer's disease. You can find groups listed in the calendar of events in your local newspaper or on its website, or by searching online for a national organization devoted to the issue that concerns you.
- *Hold on to your sense of humour.* When you're feeling stressed, rent a DVD of your favorite comedy or go out to lunch with a friend who makes you laugh.
- *Seek professional help if you are having difficulty coping with change.* Don't be afraid to ask for help. Most people benefit from support and guidance when faced with tough circumstances. Your employee assistance program (EAP) can provide you with resources and help.

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