

Lost in Transition

In life we are faced with one change after another. We are always in some state of transition. Just reflect for a moment on all the events that have brought change to your life in the past year. There are many social, political and economic changes in our world that impact us all. But reflecting on changes a little closer to home, consider changes that are difficult, painful or confusing. What are the changes in your close relationships that have occurred for you?

Perhaps, it is the loss of a relationship: the death of a parent, spouse or close friend. Maybe your marriage ended or you have close friends who separated recently. It could be that good friends have moved away or your young adult children left home. Transitions in relationships can be when an aging parent who develops dementia requires a move to nursing home. It can be the loss of a family pet, or the loss of an admired hero. Losses and changes alter the quality of our network of relationships. During this time of transition, we experience an internal journey of mourning and eventually self renewal.

In his book *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*, William Bridges describes a framework for understanding the inevitable changes we all experience in life. Understanding the natural process of transitions can help us navigate them more easily. He suggests that all transitions have three parts: endings, neutral zone and new beginnings.

1. **Endings** are often confused with finality. They really are better thought of as the beginning of self renewal. They are characterized by letting go of whatever no longer fits or is adequate to your current situation or life stage. They are experiences of something dying. They can be ordeals which we may think will be the end of us. We can find ourselves disengaged from the contexts in which we are familiar. We begin to dismantle our old relationship and the identity we have with it. We mourn the loss of the other person, the relationship and a part of ourselves that was connected to them.

2. **The Neutral Zone** is a seemingly unproductive period when we feel disconnected from people and things of the past and emotionally unconnected to the present. It is our time out. We need to surrender to the emptiness and not try to escape it. This journey is part of the transformational process. This is a spiritual, meditative time.

3. New Beginnings start when we have come to the end of the transition. We launch new activities. It is a period of self-renewal. We attain clarity about what we really want. It requires us to understand external signs and inner signals that point the way to the future.

Strategies for Coping with Relationships in Transition

Bridges outlines seven strategies for coping with the difficult, painful and confusing relationships in transition.

1. Take Your Time

While external events in our lives can occur in an instant, our inner world of re-orientation to new situations, relationships and activities requires more time. Everything does not need to come to a standstill while we work things out. However, your commitments, either to the old situation you have just left or the new one you are not fully invested in, are provisional. It is unwise to rush the inner process through which this state of mind will change.

2. Arrange Temporary Structures

We need to find ways of going on with our lives while the inner work occurs. This may involve creating temporary arrangements. For example, we can make agreements about allocation of responsibilities until a permanent solution is found, or make a decision which will be reviewed in short order.

3. Don't Act for the Sake of Action

Being in a state of transition can be frustrating. It is tempting to do something, do anything to attempt to deal with the frustration. Before we can bring one chapter of our lives to a close we, need to discover what we need to learn before taking the next step.

4. Take Care of Yourself in Little Ways

This is not the time to force change on ourselves as if it were good medicine. We need to take care of ourselves in small ways by holding on to those constants in our lives. They could be familiar routines or pleasant activities, spending time with family or good friends, enjoying favourite foods, or familiar TV programs or music that give us comfort.

5. Explore the Other Side of the Change

Some changes are chosen and some are not. If we have not chosen the change, there are plenty of reasons for refusing to see the benefits. We will undercut our anger with our "adversary" who forced the change on

us for one thing. We may discover the old situation was not as good as we thought. On the other hand, if we have chosen our change, there are just as many reasons not to examine the cost of that choice as it may weaken our resolve, or make us aware of the pain our transition causes others. Either way, we will need to explore the other side of the change situation.

6. Find Someone to Talk To

Whether we chose a close friend or relative or a professional, we need someone to talk to as we go through an important transition in our relationships. We need the opportunity to put into words our dilemmas and our feelings so we can understand what is going on. We do not need advice as much as someone who can listen. Beware of those 'listeners' who know exactly what we should do.

7. Think of Transition as a Process

Transition is a process of leaving the status quo, living for a while in fertile "time out", then coming back with an answer. As in literary characters such as Odysseus in the Homer's *Odyssey*, we need to experience both the internal and external journey. The needed transformation of people or groups of people takes place in the in-between state. Things end, you spend time in the neutral zone, and then things begin again.