Dealing with the stress resulting from change

In addition to personal changes, there are global, technological, economic and social shifts that are causing sweeping changes in our lives. All things considered, it's understandable that most of us feel we are living in turbulent times. In fact, the majority of today's working adults feel stress caused by uncertainty about the future.



There is a direct relationship between changes in our lives and the level of stress we experience. Change causes stress. When our security is threatened, or when we don't know what's coming next, we respond by feeling anxious or by worrying. This anxiety is what causes stress.

The phases of change

Adjustment to a major change takes time. In fact, there are a number of phases we go through when adapting to change.

Denial. When you first recognize change, you'll likely feel shock and disbelief. You will probably find yourself thinking, "This can't be happening to me." Bear in mind that this denial stage actually prevents us from being overwhelmed by change.

Resisting change. In this stage, you'll probably experience feelings such as anger and fear. Often, the flood of emotions we experience during changes are less frightening when we realize they are shared by others. What's important, though, is that we acknowledge these emotions. The sooner we do this, the sooner we are able to move on to the next phase.

Rational understanding. In this stage, people recognize the need for change. However, they usually focus on finding short-term solutions, with no concrete willingness to change their own patterns of behaviour.

Emotional acceptance. Here, if you are able to create a willingness for the change, you will be able to accept its real potential.

Exercise and learning. Your new acceptance of change allows for new behaviours and processes. As you begin to see the change in a new light, you may also witness an increase in your own competence.

Integration. By the time you reach this stage, you should be able to fully integrate your newly acquired patterns of thinking and acting. The change should now be routine.

Help yourself deal with change

Here are some suggestions you might consider in becoming more accommodating to instances of change:

Maintain a positive attitude. If you find yourself saying negative things to yourself such as, "I can't change," or, "Things are just going to get worse," or, "That's my luck," you may find the following techniques helpful:

- **The "stop technique."** Every time you find yourself dwelling on the negative, imagine a big, red stop sign in front of you. This signals to you that it's time to switch to more positive thoughts.
- **The "balance-sheet technique."** This is helpful to people who are focusing on the negative aspects of a situation. For instance, consider writing down a positive point to offset each complaint you have about the current situation.
- **Visualization.** This technique can be used to handle stress. All of us have at least one place in the world that we have found to be particularly peaceful and relaxing. It may be your own backyard or it may be a far-away island that you have visited while on vacation. Just taking a minute or two to visualize yourself enjoying this ideal place can restore your peace of mind.

Vent your feelings. As you go through a change, it's important to turn to others for emotional support. You may find that talking with someone who is a good listener can help to reduce your anxiety. Bear in mind, however, that the listener should be someone who will counteract your negative feelings, rather than reinforce them. If the change is work related, discuss it with a friend outside of the workplace, instead of with a co-worker. Similarly, those closest to you may not be able to give you the support you need, if they are also affected by the change. This means that you may want to talk it out with an understanding friend or perhaps with a professional.

Practice stress management. In times of change, some people resort to overeating or overuse of alcohol or prescription drugs in an effort to control stress. The truth is that these negative strategies accomplish nothing and can actually harm us. The best way to cope with stress is to find some skill, activity or technique that will help you to relax. Examples include aerobic exercise, walking, listening to music, gardening, etc. What works for one person may not work for another. The idea is to discover what works for you and then make it part of your daily routine.

Look after yourself. During times of change, we often spend so much time worrying that we tend to neglect ourselves. Remember that change requires energy. Proper nutrition, adequate rest and regular exercise will help provide the energy you need to be resilient in times of change.

Maintain relationships. Spending regular time with family or friends can help recharge your batteries. People who relegate family and friends to the back seat in their lives gravely weaken stress resistance. It’s important that due emphasis be placed on the safety net of family, friends and even pets, if you wish. They can provide much-needed support.

View change as an opportunity. It's important to realize that it’s our evaluation of a situation, not the situation itself, which causes stress. Try to recognize any positive issues that change can bring.

Above all else, the ability to weather turbulent times involves an awareness that we do have some control over the changes in our lives.