

Life Transitions: When Life Signals a Need for Change

By Laura Allan, MA, CPC

Everyday Brings Transitions for Us All

What exactly *is* transition? Well, in a word, transition is change.

Some transitions are positive in nature like marriage, graduation, birth, and career promotion. And some are less positive in nature like job loss, illness, separation, divorce, and death.

Transitions occur in our bodies, with our relationships, in our professional careers. Change occurs constantly in our lives, literally every single day.

There are other types of transitions too.

Transitions and Life Development

Perhaps the most personal transitions any of us go through occur simply as we live our lives.

The normal phases of life development are huge transitions in and of themselves as we move from childhood to teen, young adult to our child bearing and rearing years, middle age, and finally our later years, although we may not recognize the magnitude of the impact as we move through them.

We experience the mental and physical changes that transition brings, most often in small, almost indiscernible ways as we're experiencing them, the changes are so minute.

Consider the intensity of finding our sexuality in puberty and the resulting cacophony of feelings and emotions that result. Then as young adults in our child bearing years, the growth of our babies during pregnancy for which nearly every day brings a transition for us as the baby experiences its own astounding transitions.

As we mature, we again move through the transition of menopause and finally the onset of various aches, pains, and other changes as we age.

Perhaps one of our most exciting, yet challenging transitions is that from an individual to a couple, perhaps eventually a family with children, and the changes that brings to every aspect of life.

Blurring the Line Between Positive & Negative Change

Finally there are those transitions that blur the line between being positive and less so. Take for instance moving to a new home or location. We must consider the context of the move to understand its effect on our lives.

For example: Jim and Amy's move is the result of a change in assignment as they're both in the service. They're used to this life and if pressed, would admit to loving the excitement of learning about new cities and meeting new friends. They may feel the pull of relationships left behind but have been through this many times and realize that the friends they've made, are friends for life.

For Angela, the move is the result of a separation from her husband. She's aware of a certain level of fear and uncertainty as she prepares to become the major income earner for herself and her three children.



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Her transition to a new life, while planned in some respects (a new job that she worked to get) and unexpected in others (the separation was not her idea) is clearly different from Jim and Amy.

With the support of her therapist however, she's allowed herself to begin the process of leaving one life behind for another and is surprised to feel a small sense of excitement every now and then.

As you can see, whether expected or not – positive or less so – transitions can be, in fact, *are* often very stressful.

To Begin Anew We Must Endure Endings

It would seem that a change or transition means something new – and it does. But before beginning anew, we must endure an ending of some sort.

For example, in the transition to menopause, we must leave our ability to bear children behind. In the transition to a new career, we leave our old one behind. And in the transition to being married, we leave our single status behind.

With each transition, even those one would think to be positive, we are experiencing loss which can prove to be even more confusing.

Consider positive transitions like becoming married and having a baby: Two magnificent transitions fraught with emotion, sometimes confusion, often doubt and questioning of our ability to “get it right”.

Therapy and Life Transitions

Would a therapist know how to help with “life transitions”?

Consider our marriage and family therapist, Mary, as she glances at several of her appointments: She begins her day with Alex (yes, marriage and family therapists *do* see individuals!). Alex is faced with the decision of whether to take a longed-for promotion – transition!

While he's been working for this promotion for years, when it's finally offered he begins to question his motivation for working so hard in the first place. He should be more excited; after all this is what he wanted.

Another client is Ruth who is returning after a number of years seeking help for an upcoming divorce – transition! Originally Mary saw Ruth for grief counseling following the death of her mother (yes, you guessed it, another transition).

Another benefit of therapy during the transition process is illustrated by Ruth's situation. The process itself can mimic the emotions felt when in grief for many clients. Therapy can help you process these feelings and develop a more realist perspective.

Ruth is likely going to experience the grief of losing a long relationship, along with the natural triggering of feelings that the memory of her last visits to Mary will bring. She's made the right decision in seeking help.

A therapist has the expertise and training to provide you with gentle compassion and guidance through so many of the changes you'll encounter in life.

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Whether the life transitions you're going through are expected or unexpected, positive or less so, seek out a caring therapist to help you; you needn't try to go through it alone!

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