

Win the Challenge of Change

by
Jay Uhler

Change is traumatic. Even minor changes are upsetting. A friend told me that he gets a cold every time he moves from one location to another—even though he looks forward to the change.

You can apply this information to any type of change that a person can conceive. Examples are graduations, a child leaving home, job change, getting married, ending a relationship, changing our behavior patterns, retirement or moving to a new community.

The more we know what feelings to expect in a particular situation and how to manage those emotions, the less stressful it is to deal with change. The less energy we expend coping with the emotions inside ourselves, the more energy we have to cope with difficulties that occur in situations outside ourselves. To fight against ourselves—our emotions—is exhausting and we are waging a battle on two fronts. To join together with our feelings to deal with the outside world gives us strength for life's struggles.

I have been assisting people and organizations to move constructively through change for the past thirty years as a minister, a therapist, an administrator, and a corporate consultant.

Change has three phases. The first is **denial or disbelief**. Our body shuts down. We move more slowly. Our breathing is shallower. Then we take big breaths with deep sighs. We feel tired and lose our appetite. We go numb emotionally. I believe that this is our body taking over to protect us from the full intensity of the pain—to buffer us from the impact of all the emotions that suddenly occur.

I refer to the second phase as the "**letting go**" phase. We either deal with our emotions related to the change and move into the final phase or we stay glued to the past carrying it around with us wherever we go. That can be an enormous burden and can lead to physical pain or illness.

The third phase occurs when we have finished phase two and become ready to live free from any emotional ties to our lost past. We are ready to **go on with life** without the important person, position, location or experience that we have lost and we are ready to fully invest ourselves in the new opportunities and relationships that are presented us.

Let me emphasize that these three phases overlap. We gradually progress from one to the other. I have made them distinct for the purpose of clarity.

The remainder of this article will focus on phase two of the change process.

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The first emotion we will address is that of **sadness**. It is connected to our loss. The first step to managing **sadness related to loss** is to recognize that the pain of sadness is a natural human response to change. The next step is to talk about the losses with family members or friends—tell them what you will miss—and as you do, sob out the pain of the sadness. If it would be comforting, have them hold you as you cry. If not, simply appreciate the presence of a supportive person.

People are taught that crying is "breaking down." In reality, it is *letting go*. Letting go brings with it healing relief as our sobs and tears wash away our pain.

Frustration also occurs with change. I think of frustration as a combination of helplessness and anger. With many changes there is a sense of helplessness that there is not a damn thing that you can do about it. The anger grows out of the frustration.

When we feel helpless, it is important for us to assess our options. We may not like them, but when we appraise our options and select one, we feel in control and that reduces our feelings of helplessness. We can feel helpless when there are two positive opportunities, but we can have only one. We may feel disappointment that we cannot have both, but we experience relief when we make our choice.

Our anger may be directed many places. It can be directed toward anyone who happens to be around. We must accept our anger as a part of our human nature and then decide what we are going to do with it. To direct it toward undeserving family or friends hurts them and hurts us if we lose their friendship or respect. To release the anger in ways that benefit ourselves and hurt no one else is most constructive.

Another experience is **guilt**. The problem with guilt is that it tells lies to us —tells us that we are bad. If we believe guilt's message of judgment, we will experience the pain of self-rejection—the most painful of pains.

Guilt does not like ambiguity, so it goes looking for a peg upon which to hang itself. It selects a past event and says, "If only I would have done something differently."

When we are in a situation of change, we need to remind ourselves that guilt is one of the feelings that we will experience, that we did the best that we could to make improvements under the circumstances that existed, and remind ourselves that we are a good, caring person.

To avoid the pain of guilt, you must talk to yourself saying, "Oh, there is the guilt. I'm glad that I know it is there. It's natural for me to feel guilty about this." Then remind yourself that guilt lies. It does not tell you the truth about you. Then continue your thought process by telling yourself all your virtues.

This does not specifically relate to life's transitions, however it is worth making the point that based on my familiarity with people over the years, those who experience the most guilt are the ones who try hardest to do their best. This is probably because of their high expectations for themselves.

A significant feeling related to change is the feeling is **fear**. There is fear of the unknown future. Even though there may be excitement about the changes, you will be afraid.

It is helpful to remember that fear does not predict the future. It only tells you that you are afraid. Remember that fear is a natural emotion that accompanies change.

People also can be frightened by the intensity of their emotions when change occurs. This is especially true if you were taught that you should not have these feelings or were never taught what to do with them when you do have them.

Emotions may be combined to form **ambivalence**. You may feel sadness and loss, and at the same time relieved, or even excited, to move on.

A woman in the out-placement department of a company told me, "I was glad that I was laid off. I felt sad at the loss of my colleagues, but I was delighted to have the opportunity to do many things that I couldn't do while I worked." She had ambivalent feelings—sad and happy at the same time.

If you are moving from one town to another, you may feel sad about leaving friends behind, yet excited to be moving to a new location that has many advantages.

My hope is that these thoughts have assisted you to make the transitions in your life flow more smoothly. Best wishes to you as you face the challenge of change.

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