

Making Life Easier Program

COPING WITH CHANGE

Basics

Change is a fact of life. However, changes that used to unfold gradually now often occur at an alarmingly rapid pace. Thanks to television and the internet, images and information zip around the globe in seconds, and we're sometimes expected to respond just as quickly.

Change can take many forms and affect every aspect of our lives. It occurs in our family, work, social life and well-being. Some changes involve additions, such as births, new friends or relationships, and new possessions. Others involve losses, such as death, divorce or illness. Some changes are sudden, such as losing your job, while others are more gradual, such as entering middle age.

Change can be perceived as good or bad, depending on the person and the circumstances. For example, a divorce may be seen as a tragedy or a relief. A promotion is generally viewed as a change for the good, but if you're anxious or unsure of your skills, you may view it as negative or threatening. Change may be sought out, appreciated or accepted, or it may be forced upon you, and resented or resisted. It can challenge or stimulate you, or make you feel anxious and threatened. Too little change can make life boring or depressing, while too much change can be uncomfortable or overwhelming.



Whatever its form, change requires a transition period; i.e., moving from the familiar to the unknown. This takes energy and, when the demands are too great, it can drain you physically and mentally. Both positive and negative changes can create stress. In order to prevent stress-related symptoms it is important to effectively manage it. Unmanaged stress can lead to physical and emotional disorders, including everything from headaches and digestive problems to high blood pressure and insomnia.

The key to coping with change is to recognize it, understand its effects, and, as much as possible, bring your responses to the change under control. When you can't control the change itself, adjusting your attitude toward it can help lessen any stress or tension. You'll stay healthier that way.

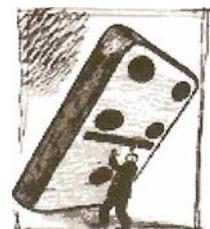
When changes occur at work, one frequently asked question is **“How can I cope with changes at work when I have little or no control over them?”**

First, remember that an organization that doesn't change is unlikely to grow and survive. That goes for people, too. Accept change as inevitable and look for ways to make the change work to your advantage when possible. Ask yourself: how can I view this as an opportunity, rather than a crisis? Sometimes, changing your attitude is the best strategy for coping with change.

Second, ask yourself whether it's really true that you don't have control over the changes. Is there a staff meeting, suggestion box or committee at work that allows you to make suggestions before changes are decided? Even if the changes are ones you don't like, you may feel better knowing you at least had some say about them.

Key Tips

Tip 1 Change is stressful, even when it's positive and welcome. But no change at all can make us feel like we're stagnating. Strive for balance. Too much stress at once, or even a moderate amount of stress over a long period of time, can be unhealthy. People who experience a lot of changes in a brief period - within a year, for instance - are more likely to experience an accident or illness within that period than people who face fewer changes, research shows.



Tip 2 The Chinese word for crisis is made up of two symbols: the symbol for danger and the symbol for opportunity. Try to think of change as a mixture of crisis (or danger, or

uncertainty) and opportunity. Ask yourself what lesson you might learn, what skill you might develop, or what aspect of yourself you might strengthen as a result of coping with this change.

Tip 3 **During times of change and high stress**, remember that regular exercise, a balanced diet and adequate sleep is needed to maintain your ability to cope.

Specifics

Evaluate your life every few months to determine how many significant changes you are experiencing. *Just being aware* will make it easier for you to understand and deal with the stress that almost always accompanies change. Change can lead to a wide range of stress-related symptoms and disorders, such as:

- Headaches
- Insomnia
- Digestive problems
- Muscle tension and backaches
- High blood pressure and cardiac problems
- Impaired immune response
- Depression or anxiety
- Irritability
- Eating too much or too little
- Alcohol or drug abuse

If you can, schedule planned changes so that not too many occur at once. For example, if you're getting married, going through changes at work and coping with an ailing parent, it's probably a good idea to hold off at least for awhile on moving or buying that new house until you've had time to adjust to these other changes.

When you find yourself faced with an unexpected change, take a moment to evaluate your emotional response. Ask yourself are you happy, sad, scared, angry, threatened, resentful, excited, indifferent? After you've determined what you're feeling, it can help to ask yourself some or all of the following questions:

- Is my reaction justified?
- Is the intensity of my reaction justified by the facts?
- Am I overreacting, or misinterpreting?
- Is there another way to look at this? Is there an opportunity here?
- Are there aspects of this situation that I can control?
- Would more information help me cope better with this change?

Learn a relaxation exercise. Relaxation is one of the most effective tools for managing stress and the anxiety or tension that can go along with it. Relaxation helps your body undo the negative effects of stress and can keep you functioning better physically and mentally.

Don't forget humor goes a long way toward easing stress. **Try to find the humor in situations**, and in yourself, whenever possible.

Don't expect to have to weather every change alone. **Look for support from family or friends.**

Resources

Davis, Martha, Matthew McKay and Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*. New Harbinger Publications, 2000.

The King County Making Life Easier Program with services provided by APS Healthcare is available to help employees and household members cope with a variety of life changes.

For confidential assistance call toll free 1-888-874-7290.

