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Coping With Major Life Changes (3 min read)

Major life changes such as getting a new boss or having a baby affect all aspects of your life. Whether positive or negative, change can be difficult to adjust to.

"All major changes involve a component of loss at their center," says Cara DiMarco, Ph.D., a counselor in Oregon and author of *Moving Through Life Transitions With Power and Purpose*. "That loss might involve loss of a particular routine, loss of opportunities, loss of a sense of yourself or a loss of hope."

As a result, most people going through major life transitions can expect to feel varying levels of anxiety, stress, confusion and possibly self-doubt. These feelings should not become persistent, however, but should decrease over time. If they don't ease and your ability to function in daily life becomes significantly impaired, you may need professional help.

The adjustment period typically is uncomfortable, but you can do things to make change easier on yourself.

Expect disruption

In the vortex of change, many people expect to go on without missing a beat, as if the change were a minor inconvenience. But this attitude isn't realistic. "While it's essential that we're able to be productive in the midst of change, we also need to allow ourselves to not feel fully centered, to not feel absolutely on top of our game," Dr. DiMarco says.

If you're starting a new job, for instance, and are used to performing at 95 percent, don't expect to be up to speed immediately.

Focus on the known

In the midst of change, "people tend to over-focus on the unknown," Dr. DiMarco says. "This is only natural, because that's where most of their anxiety lies. But some things you just can't know until you're in the middle of the experience."

To avoid needless worry and self-doubt about changes at hand, focus on the known elements that are present in the new situation.

Anticipate change

Change is inevitable, so it's helpful to plan for it. "Being prepared allows you to have more options and be aware of potential obstacles," Dr. DiMarco says.

If you have children in high school, for instance, you know they will soon leave home -- and you'll have more time to yourself.

To establish several game plans for coping with empty-nest syndrome and making good use of your free time, sit down with someone -- a career counselor, personal counselor or trusted friend -- and use the person as a sounding board.

Pinpoint patterns

How do you move through change? What sorts of feelings and reactions tend to consistently recur? "These are the kinds of questions to ask yourself when your life is stable so you can develop your own personal tool kit of coping strategies when change ensues," Dr. DiMarco says.

Look for meaning

Change disrupts the continuity of life, but even the most difficult and traumatic changes can be useful. "You can learn from every experience," Dr. DiMarco says. You might have never chosen that life-changing experience or the lesson it taught you about yourself or the world, but if you can find the meaning or valuable outcome behind it, that experience will become part of your internal world, rather than an external agent acting on you.

That mind-set, Dr. DiMarco says, "increases your sense of personal control and power. By extracting something out of change, you can create a sense of mastery."

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