

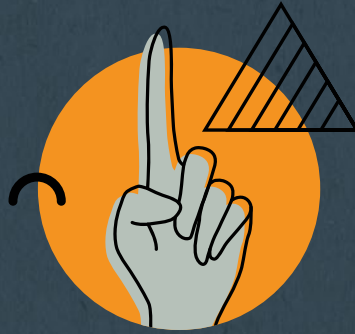
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Managing Life's Transitions
A Toolkit

Transition
Planning

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What Is A Life Transition?

What Is A Life Transition?

You will experience transitions many times in your life. Some of these transitions are small and just fit into the fabric of your life, while some are much larger and require time and effort to process. Some transitions are planned while others catch you by surprise. Some transitions are exciting and positive, others are upsetting or distressing, and others just represent milestones along the way.



Life transitions can be happy or exciting events like a new job or marriage or a new baby, but they can also be upsetting, such as the death of a loved one or the loss of a job. Even life events like turning forty or retiring can require an adjustment



What Is A Life Transition?

We tend to expect that our lives should unfold in a relatively straight line from start to finish - from birth through to death – checking off milestones (high school, first job, marriage, children) as we go. In reality, however, it is much more likely that you will experience many disruptions over the course of our lives. Bruce Feiler, author of *Life is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age* (2020), says that we will experience as many as 30-40 small life disruptions over our lifetimes and as many as 5-6 large ones. These can range from switching jobs on the way up the corporate ladder to being unexpectedly widowed to a cancer diagnosis to breaking an arm to transitioning genders. Some of these ‘lifequakes’ are choices that we make for ourselves such as a job change, moving house or adopting a child. Others are driven by more external forces such as an unexpected death, a mass layoff, or a natural disaster.

Transitions are an important part of your life journey. They can lead to a re-imagining of who you are and how you fit in the world. Everyone experiences transitions differently and every transition is different but there are some common variables within every transition. Learning how to manage these variables will help make your own life transitions easier and more manageable.



**How Do You Manage
A Life Transition?**

Managing Transitions

While everyone will have to deal with a transition at some time or another, not everyone finds them easy to manage well. Losing your job, for example, can be upsetting on a level beyond simply the loss of income. It can mean redefining what you do with your days and how you see yourself as an individual. If a significant part of your identity was previously ‘I work for Company X’ or ‘I am a manager,’ it can be challenging to redefine yourself once that specific role is no longer part of your identity. Losing a spouse unexpectedly can plunge you into unexpected levels of grief that leave you unable to cope with day-to-day necessities and make you wonder if life will ever be ‘normal’ again.

It is important to recognize that ‘transition’ is not merely ‘change.’ Transition is the inner process that helps you come to terms with an external change. It’s a process of letting go of ‘how things used to be’ and becoming more comfortable with how things are now. It is a process of reimagining your life and finding a way through the change that will bring you to a better place down the road. (Bridges, n.d.)

Managing Transitions

On a broader scale, Canadians are collectively transitioning from pre-Covid pandemic life to 'living with Covid' life. The actual 'change' began when the country shut down in March 2020 and many of us are still adjusting to the transition that dealing with Covid necessitated. Not all parts of life will go back to exactly what they were pre-pandemic. Some aspects of daily life will be better and some will seem worse. We each need to decide what that transition means for ourselves while navigating and incorporating the necessary external changes.

Successfully managing a life transition can lead to a richer, better, more authentic life. Taking the time to consider what you really want to do after a job loss can mean finding a new job that you are truly passionate about. Reinventing the way you do things following a divorce can result in you finding true happiness alone or with a new partner. Finally taking the plunge and starting your own business after years of working for others can be invigorating and let you find greater meaning in work. But it all takes time.



The Transition Process

The Transition Process

Transitions almost always begin with an 'ending.' This can be an actual loss or simply the end of a specific stage of life. Following that new beginning is a middle stage that is often longer, messier, and more challenging than one would hope. This is the stage where you mourn what you've lost and prepare for the third phase – your 'new normal' and a new life pattern.

William Bridges was a leading researcher in the field of transitions, particularly in the corporate realm but also edging into personal life transitions. He believed transitions followed a chronological sequence – endings, a neutral zone, and new beginnings. While this is broadly accurate, it is not necessarily the case that a transition will follow this path exactly. Feiler suggests that while there is generally a long goodbye to the life that was and then a potentially messy middle followed by a new beginning, these stages are rarely clean cut and don't always follow a straight line. There can be false starts and changes in what you think your future direction should be while in the middle of a transition.

The Beginning

The Middle

The New Beginning



The Beginning

At the beginning of any transition you may experience a whole range of feelings and emotions. These feelings tend to be seen as being more negative ones – **anger, anxiety, confusion, sadness, numbness, fear, or shame.**

When faced with a life transition – whether it is one you have chosen (quitting your job to go into business for yourself, making the mutual decision to divorce) or one you have not (the unexpected death of a spouse, an accident that leaves you with significant injuries to overcome) - you first need to accept the change. This may happen more easily in the face of ‘chosen change.’ It can be much more challenging in the case of an unexpected transition. You may be sad, scared, or ashamed – these are all valid feelings as you work through the change and begin to process it.

Sometimes rituals can help with accepting the change. You might get a tattoo to honour your deceased family member or attend a church service or sweat lodge ceremony to find new community or to help process the change. You may change your name if you’re going through a divorce or gender transition. These are all ways of marking a significant change in your life in a way that has meaning specifically for you.



The Middle

Gradually, you will acknowledge the negative feelings that often come with a transition and will start to accept the change. This is a time when you start to let go of your past habits and begin to create new ones. If you used to get up at 6:00am for your commute to work and you've lost your job, you may decide to wake up later as you don't need to be out the door at a specific time. Perhaps you will get up at 7:00am instead and go for a walk. You may have time to take up painting or start writing a journal. This can be a time of learning more about yourself and what you need to make your life enjoyable. But this letting go of past habits and developing new ones takes time – often more time than you expect.

This stage can last a long time as you let go of the things that no longer work for you. We tend to believe that transitions should be fairly short-lived – lose your job, find a new one and move on. Have a baby, create a new schedule, and pick up where you left off. In reality, transitions are rarely as simple or struggle-free as that. Many major life transitions will take years before you reach a point where you feel you have really come through the change and fully into your new reality.

This stage of reflecting on what you are leaving behind and considering what you want the future to look like can help to make a transition easier and more successful. It is the difference between merely letting the winds blow you off course or learning to steer your own ship no matter what weather comes.



The New Beginning

Eventually, you will begin to feel hopeful about the future again as you start to build out your new life. You may find a new job or you may discover a new hobby. Your new baby will start to sleep more and move into toddlerhood and you'll find more time for yourself again.

Once you have come through a transition, you will find that your life's story has taken on new meaning. You will have rewritten your view of yourself, often for the better. In the process of writing this story for yourself, you will find your own power.

It can be difficult to navigate a transition by oneself. Sometimes reaching out to others is necessary. Whether this is a mental health professional, a family member or friend, or even a stranger, sometimes others can give us perspective we are struggling to achieve on our own. This help can take many forms – sometimes it's just a listening ear but sometimes it's someone telling us we can't do something that lights the fire. Don't be afraid to reach out if you need a hand.



**What Can You Do To
Make Transitions Easier?**



Make It Easier

Over our lifetimes, most of us will experience many small transitions as well as a handful of major ones. In fact, we may spend a large portion of our adult lives in one transition or another. Due to this, it would be beneficial to learn how to handle them better. In many ways managing life transitions is a skill that you can improve on. Here are some suggestions for things you can do to make these transitions – whether large or small – easier.

Prepare for the transition

When an upcoming transition is an expected one, you can do some of the necessary planning ahead of time. If you are going to be switching jobs in a couple of weeks, you can figure out your new commute and organize any other changes you will have to make to transition smoothly. If a significant surgery is coming up, you could prepare meals or line up rides to appointments ahead of time.

Even if a transition is unexpected, there are things you can do to prepare for them in general. The most important factor you can work on is having a more positive mindset. If you believe you can navigate any life changes and that everything will eventually work out, you will have the basis to manage life transitions whenever they appear.



Make It Easier

Recognize that change is part of life

If you look at change as an experience that should mostly be avoided or as entirely negative, it will be harder to cope with any sort of transition. If you can accept that everyone faces change on a regular basis and that it can be a positive part of moving through life, you will find it easier to navigate to your new, better, normal. By acknowledging what you are leaving behind, you will help make space for what is still to come.

Try to focus on the positive aspects of the transition. Maybe you weren't really enjoying the job that just laid you off – now you can find something you'll enjoy more. Perhaps moving across the country to care for an aging parent will allow you to downsize and declutter and lead to other life options.

Routines are important

When faced with a transition, especially an unexpected one, routines can help you keep yourself on track. Routines can be comforting in times of change and they don't have to be complicated. Rather than staying up late and then sleeping in for months following the loss of a job, figure out a new, more consistent routine. Maybe you can decide to get up at 9am instead and go for a walk or make plans to meet a friend for coffee on a regular basis. Giving your day some structure can help you to move forward.



Make It Easier

Listen to what you're saying to yourself

Don't beat yourself up for things you can't control. Remind yourself of times in the past that you've successfully navigated change. There may be skills you've developed over the years that you can use to help yourself through this transition. Change can be hard and you will make missteps and wrong decisions but be gentle with yourself. If you wouldn't say it to your best friend and they wouldn't say it to you, don't say it to yourself.

Stay connected

Transitions can be incredibly lonely times. Whether you've lost your job and no longer have day-to-day interactions with colleagues, of your spouse has died, or you are newly divorced and alone. Make sure you take time to talk and interact with your family and friends. Making time to connect with others will help with any loneliness and will give some focus to your days.



Make It Easier

Set reasonable expectations

Transitions take time. You would not expect to ‘get over’ the death of a close friend in a day or a week, and you shouldn’t expect to ‘get over’ the loss of a long-term job or adjust to a cancer diagnosis immediately. Take your time to come to terms with the change – it’s not a race. It takes time to adjust and it can be uncomfortable. You need to give yourself the space to make changes at a pace that you can sustain.

Setting yourself reasonable goals can help manage your expectations. Rather than focusing on the fact that you’ve been out of work for a month and deciding to either give up entirely or randomly apply for 50 jobs in a week, you could decide to apply to three or four jobs a week and really focus on making those applications great. It doesn’t have to be all or nothing.

Journalling can help

The act of writing things down can be very helpful in times of change. Taking the time to record your thoughts can help you understand how you’re feeling about the change that has happened. It can also help you determine who you are and what you value, and outline what you want to do with your life going forward. Journalling can also help you uncover pieces of your life that you might otherwise forget such as things you used to enjoy doing or things you would like to do going forward. It can also help you calm your thoughts when you are feeling overwhelmed by all the change.



Make It Easier

Embrace the discomfort

Transitions can be confusing and disorienting. Recognize that it is ok to feel insecure, anxious, angry, or even ashamed. You will not feel this way forever but accepting that you are not in a comfortable place will help you move forward. The confusion and fear of the early stage of a transition will eventually fade and everything will get easier.

Don't self-medicate

The excessive use of drugs and alcohol during a time of change can be unhelpful. It will make a time of confusion even more challenging and difficult.

Take care of yourself

Transitions are good times to put in place healthier habits or maintain the ones you already have. Getting regular exercise, eating well, getting sleep, meditating, spending time with friends, these are all helpful in helping you to work through a transition. Stress is a common piece of many transitions. Putting self-care towards the top of your list will help you manage that stress and make moving forward much easier.



Make It Easier

Find some support

Talking to your friends and family is a great place to find support for working through the transition process. Sharing your thoughts and experiences with others and listening to theirs helps to build connections and community which can make transitions easier and life more enjoyable. If you find you need additional support, seeking out a mental health professional can also be a very good option.

Find the humour

The use of positive humour can help you reframe the situation you find yourself in. Finding the lighter side of the situation can often help reduce your stress about the changes happening in your life. This sort of humour is more about seeing the absurdity of a situation. It is not about mocking yourself for your failings.

Moving Onward

Life transitions are unavoidable. You will experience many of them over the course of your life. By recognizing that they are an inevitable part of being human and taking steps to manage them, you will be able to move through them with greater ease.



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Call Men &'s Mensline
1-833-327-MENS
24 hours a day, 7 days a week
Get help and support from a
trained counsellor



Alberta Health Services has
many resources available,
as well as a dedicated
Mental Health Line
Albertahealthservices.ca



211

Alberta 211
Links to many helplines and
other resources available



Calgary's Distress Centre
24-hour help available
Phone or text 403.266.HELP



Edmonton's Distress Line
780-482-4357 (HELP)
24 hours a day, 7 days a week



(Southwestern)
Alberta's Distress Line
Call 403-327-7905
Toll free 1-888-787-2880

The rest of Canada: Crisis Services Canada can direct you to a local helpline. If you are struggling with making a life transition, reach out to talk to someone.

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