

Coping With Change

"Nothing endures but change."

—Heraclitus

Heraclitus had it right: Change is a fact of life. In the Greek philosopher's time, change tended to unfold gradually. But today's world changes 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 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 an adjustment of some kind. This takes energy and, when the demands are too great, it can drain you physically and mentally. Change creates stress, so it needs to be managed effectively to prevent the development of stress-related symptoms and illnesses. Unmanaged stress can cause 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 bring it—or your responses to it—under control as much as possible. 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.

What to Know About Change

Strive for moderate change.

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.

Try to see the opportunities in change.

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.

Physical health will support mental health.

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.

Physical and Emotional Aspects of Change

Evaluate your life on a regular basis—every few months or so—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.

The physical symptoms of change can be unsettling, to say the least. Change can cause all sorts 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, buying a new house, and coping with an ailing parent, it's probably a good idea to hold off on looking for a new job 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 how you're feeling. 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. Humor helps here, too.

Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2013). *Coping with change*. Raleigh, NC: Author.

Interested in submitting a question or comment?
Send an e-mail to aharkleroad@ers-eap.com.
Your feedback is greatly appreciated!



Achieve a Better Balance in Your Life

At times, short-term or permanent changes caused by family situations can make it difficult to find a balance between work and home duties. Changes in your child's school schedule, caring for an older adult, or expanding your family can be overwhelming, but small adjustments to your daily routine can help you regain the balance you lack.

Slow down.

Life is simply too short, so don't let things pass by you in a blur. Take steps to stop and enjoy the things and people around

you. Don't make plans for every evening or weekend, and find some ways to distance yourself from the things that are causing you the most stress.

Learn to manage your time.

Avoid procrastination. For many people, most of the stress they feel comes from simply being disorganized and procrastinating. Learn to set more realistic goals and deadlines and then stick to them. You'll find that not only are you less stressed, but your work will be better.

Share the load.

Even though you may sometimes feel you are the only one capable of doing something,

it's usually not the case. Get your partner or other family members to help you with all your personal and family responsibilities. Taking care of the household, children, or parents should not be the responsibility of just one person

Let things go (don't sweat the small stuff).

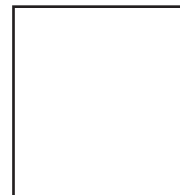
It's simpler said than done, but learn to let things go once in a while. So what if the dishes don't get washed everyday or that the house doesn't get vacuumed every week. Learn to recognize the things that don't really have much impact in your life and allow yourself to let them go and then not beat yourself up for doing so.

Continued below



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Explore your options.

If you are feeling overwhelmed with your family responsibilities, get help if you can afford it or enlist family members and friends for some tasks. Find a sitter for your children, explore options for aging parents, and seek counseling for yourself. In many cases, you have options, but you need to take the time to find them.

Talk to your employer.

Find out if there is a way of modifying your employment to better handle your current situation. These changes might include flextime, job-sharing, telecommuting, or part-time employment, or just a temporary adjustment in your job duties.

Take charge.

Sometimes it's easier for you to allow yourself to feel overwhelmed rather than to take charge and develop a prioritized list of things that need to get done. You need to buck the trend. Develop a list. Set priorities. And then enjoy the satisfaction of crossing things off your list.

Simplify.

It seems human nature for just about everyone to take on too many tasks and responsibilities, to try to do too much, and to own too much. Find a way to simplify your life. Change your lifestyle. Learn to say no and to ask for help. Get rid of the clutter and baggage in your house and your life.

In the end, the key word is balance. You need to find the right balance that works for you. Celebrate your successes and don't dwell on your failures. Life is a process, and so is striving for balance in your life.

Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2013). *Achieve a better balance in your life*. Raleigh, NC: Author.

Are you surrounded by notes and reminders? Stress can impact your memory! Call the Employee Assistance Program for support and an evaluation. 1-800-292-2780