

Understanding Life Change

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Change is one thing in life that is certain. Sooner or later, every major part of life changes. Relationships, physical health, emotions, finances, and ways of spending time do not stay the same. Some changes are positive and welcome, while others are not. Some changes are temporary, but others are permanent. People choose some changes and must accept others, but nobody escapes change.

What Does Change Look Like?

Unplanned Change: Some changes happen suddenly. A person you love dies unexpectedly. A new job opportunity appears with no advance notice. Other changes happen gradually. You realize that over a period of months, you have started spending more time working and less time with family and friends.

Developmental Change: Developmental changes happen to most people at about the same age. Physical changes like puberty and menopause are examples. Other expected developmental changes include shifting from school to work, increased independence in managing life, and other social, emotional, and intellectual changes. Many things can interfere with expected developmental changes. But because they happen to most people, we expect them to happen.

Planned Change: People make deliberate changes. To take advantage of that sudden new job opportunity, you may decide to move. In preparation for relocation expenses, you cut back on spending and increase savings. You may choose to change to increase life satisfaction, health, or security. People decide to change communication patterns with family or

friends, quit smoking or drinking, or change how they use time or money.

Are Your Life Changes “On Time”?

Expected developmental changes once provided a clear map for life. School was followed by marriage, family, work, and retirement. After retirement, illness or frailty was followed by death. It is easy to see the limits of this model. It did not predict real life for many people.

This general model still shapes the expectations of many people, even though fewer people live by it. Today, more people make choices that used to be associated with different ages or stages of life. Forty-year olds begin college. Grandparents raise grandchildren.

Scientists understand the aging process better than ever. Changes that were once considered natural and inevitable are now understood differently. Some “knowledge” has proved to be wrong. For instance, scientists used to believe that people were born with all the brain cells we would ever have. New science shows that the brain probably creates new cells constantly. As a result, mental decline that used to be considered part of the normal aging process is seen differently.



Why Is Change So Hard?

All change is stressful. Even positive, planned change takes energy as you adapt or adjust. Negative changes beyond your control are most stressful. These changes bring discomfort. Feelings of disorientation and confusion are common. Depression, denial, anger, and blame are common reactions to unplanned, negative changes. These emotions often make adjusting to change harder.

Resisting the stress of change is a natural reaction. It doesn't matter whether change is big or small, expected or not, positive or negative. The first step to moving ahead in the change process is to ask yourself: Can I accept responsibility and be honest with myself? How well do I take risks, solve problems creatively, and remain optimistic? If you do these well, the change process may be easier for you.

What is the Change Process?

The change process involves the steps you take to achieve or adjust to change. Change requires mental, emotional, and possibly physical work. (Exactly what that work is depends on the change.) This process begins when you recognize the need for change. It ends successfully when the change has been integrated into life, and no longer requires a high energy expenditure to maintain. Unfortunately, the change process doesn't always end successfully. But with careful planning and persistence, the chance of succeeding grows.

What Can Change do for Me?

Change is part of life, so it is helpful to have skills for succeeding at it. Skills that help you achieve or adapt to change will help you in other areas of life. The change process will affect you in many

ways. Values, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, motivations, abilities, and behaviors are challenged. You may learn to use resources like time and money in healthier ways. You may discover other parts of your life that need improvement.

Change provides a chance to grow. Pay attention to how you feel, think, and behave as you respond to change. You will learn more about yourself. You may even decide to make new changes. You may develop more self-confidence as you make desired changes and reach your goals.

Does Change Affect Other People?

Change affects those who are close to us. It is natural for them to resist your change. Often, they can either make the change process easier or harder.

Cultivate and coach your supporters. Let close family or friends know that they can help. Tell them how important their encouragement and support are. If a clergy member, health care provider, financial counselor, or mental health professional can help, reach out. Communicate often with your supporters. We all need people who listen, praise, and reinforce us. Remember to encourage and praise yourself, too!

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Desktop publishing by Rutgers-Cook College Resource Center

Published: October 2001

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