

# Handling Changes Successfully

Changes are a natural part of life, but many changes can be challenging and create stress. It is important then that we learn to handle change successfully. Here are some suggestions.

Recognize that change can affect you emotionally and physically. Be aware of your feelings and of what is happening in your body. Use this awareness to alert you so you know when to make necessary adjustments in the way you handle change.

Realize that change involves **letting go of the past**, not just moving ahead into the future. This means that there will be feelings of sadness and of missing the familiar. This is OK, but we should not allow ourselves to get stuck in these feelings on a long-term basis. We need to move on to the next stage in coping with change.

William Bridges describes this next stage as the "**neutral zone**". He points out that the feelings of being lost, confused and empty that often occur at this stage are not a sign that something is wrong. Instead he suggests that these are normal feelings in an in-between time. Instead of feeling that this is the time to give up, Bridges suggests that we recognize this as a time to thoughtfully try new ways of doing things.

Additionally Bridges suggests four things that can help us in the "neutral zone"

- doing things that help us have a sense of **control**. This may be as simple as setting a routine and sticking to it
- taking the time to **understand** the process of change, the feelings we have and reflecting on the reason for the changes
- having the **support** of others. This can be friends, family or even professional counsellors. If the people who usually support us are not available then it is important to be open to new friendships. However we need to avoid the desperation of latching on to just anyone because we are lonely
- having a clear sense of **purpose** which serves as a guide during periods of decision making.

As we work our way through the letting go phase and the neutral zone we will find that we reach a point where we have begun to adapt to the changes in our situation. We then begin to practice more consistently the behaviours which we believe will help us to do well in our new situations.

As we go through the transition process there are simple things we can do to make the process less stressful. We can:

- ❖ **prepare ourselves** for the changes we can anticipate by learning all we can about the new situation and planning different ways to deal with it
- ❖ **take care of ourselves** physically by taking time to relax, getting enough rest, exercising regularly and eating healthily
- ❖ **avoid pitfalls** such as making impulsive changes, or avoiding reality by pretending nothing has changed, or by numbing ourselves with alcohol or drugs
- ❖ **think positively** and expect that we will cope. Remember that we have coped with many changes during our lifetime and so do have skills available to help us in this new situation. Taking a long-term perspective is also useful as it helps us recognize that today's changes may not be that crucial in ten years time
- ❖ **ask advice** from others who have successfully gone through similar changes

### Special Tips for New Students

- The fact that you are going through changes in several areas can feel overwhelming. It helps to reflect on what is happening and decide which changes you need to deal with first, e.g. academics, friendships or finances.
- Do not be hesitant to use the resources available. Ask for the help you need from your lecturers, your academic advisor, senior students, or residence hall staff. If you continue to have a hard time adjusting or have personal issues you want to address confidentially speak to a counsellor at the Health Centre.
- Get involved in campus activities. There are many different ones to choose from, most of them free. This is a wonderful way to make new friends. As a bonus you can increase your physical fitness or learn a new activity.
- Be open to the new experiences that will come your way.
- Remember that your primary purpose here is to get an education, so remember the basics. Go to all classes and do your assignments on time (despite the many other interesting things that will compete for your time!).
- Keep in touch with those back home.

Make time for self-reflection

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