

LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY

Change as a cyclical process

This article explores some thinking about change, the cycles of change and some suggestions to help guide you through a period of transition.

Introduction

During periods of uncertainty or **transition** it can often feel like being caught up in a tornado of constant movement and **panic** as the mind generates questions, problems and **fear** mutates into all kinds of worse case scenarios. Finding a **still point** can seem impossible. Yet, even when resting, we are in the midst of continual movement as the cells in our body regenerate and replicate.

Humans live with a paradox. At our roots, we have a need for basic **security** and **stability**. However, when we really look into the cycles of the natural world, we see that **impermanence** is a **constant** phenomenon. Can we really be secure of anything?

The transitions of the **seasons** perhaps guide us to the cyclical nature of change. They demonstrate that there is a point of fullness or **harvest** at **Summer**, which naturally and inevitably progresses towards a time of **emptiness**, with the dying away of **Autumn** into **Winter**, as the **seeds** of new growth incubate and **germinate**, towards the fullness of **spring**. The earth has been evolving with this cyclical process for millions of years. However, when faced with change in our lives, our deepest fears and emotions can emerge at this time and create immense suffering.

The Cyclical Nature of Change

The framework of the western psyche and work culture, until recently was built on this base need for security. Marriage meant “forever” and the “job for life” was an integral part of that system. However, as we have seen, bigger global changes eventually influence smaller communities and eventually, individuals.

The advances in technology have dramatically changed our society and work cultures; the ‘job for life’ is now defunct, making way for tele working, the portfolio career and the need for regular career re-branding. Downsizing has led to increased redundancy, and more people than ever before embarking upon the journey towards self-employment. In a very short space of time, we have **adapted** heroically to these changes.

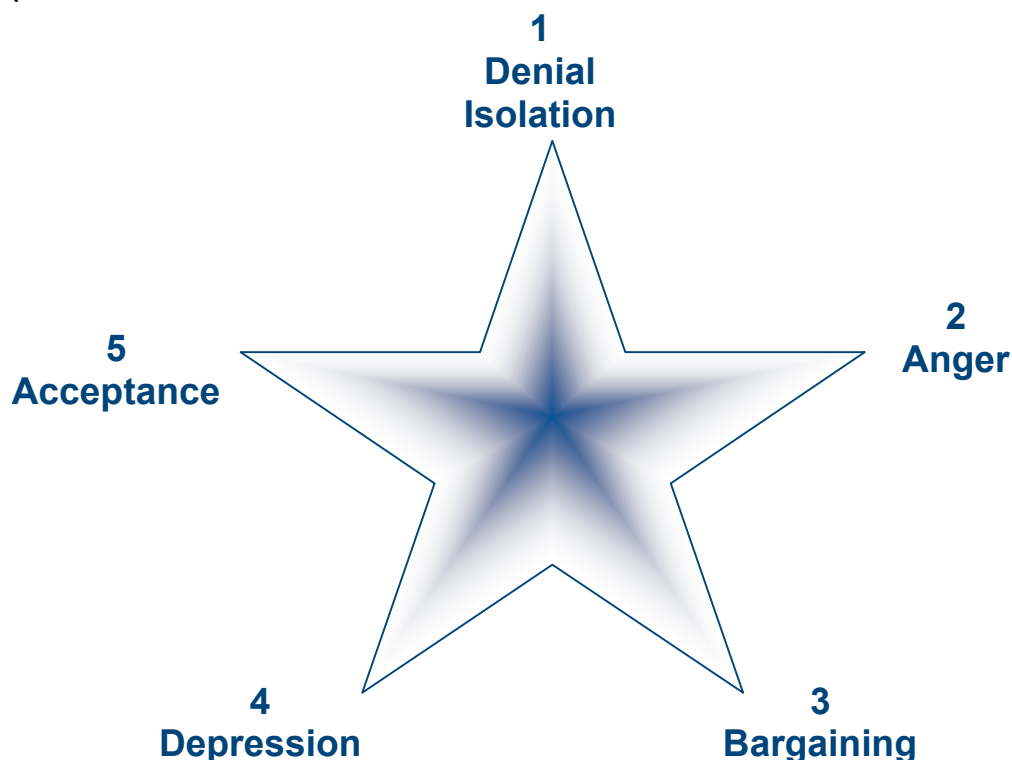
The Five Stages of Transition

Where change is forced upon us by external events, the chances are that we may not be able to control it, managing the change process may be hampered by our feelings of impotence. When the event has a major impact on our life for example the death of a loved one, divorce, illness, or the loss of a job, we will inevitably go through a process of bereavement.

We may find ourselves at one of the stages of transition as described by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her work around death and bereavement. (Kübler-Ross, Elizabeth, "On Death and Dying", 1970).

Kübler-Ross and her associates noticed that people seemed to move through these stages as a way of coping with and living through the transition. There is health in this organic process of adapting to circumstances. However, as we are continually adapting to changes, problems may occur if we become stuck in one or more of the stages. This may block movement towards acceptance, letting go and moving forward

Whilst these stages were initially observed, in people facing death, they can be a helpful tool to consider in relation to other periods of transition such as divorce or redundancy.



Each individual will pass through and experience these phases differently. This will depend on many factors including, how they find meaning, how they have faced similar challenges in the past, belief systems and the support and resources they have in their life.

The following is a brief description of the stages.

1) Denial and isolation

This is usually an initial and temporary stage. It is as if the psyche organically creates a shock absorber to make time for the news to sink in and make sense of what is happening. For example, when someone discovers they have a terminal illness, they may ask for results to be checked and rechecked or simply refuse to believe it. However, staying stuck in denial creates a sense of isolation as people around find it harder to relate to the person as they become more out of contact.

2) Anger

Denial is difficult to sustain long term and may eventually mobilise into anger or feelings of outrage, envy, resentment or “why me”? This is a challenging stage for the person and those involved, as feelings become displaced and projected onto external events, people, places and things. Empathy for the person in this stage, can become challenging and people might try to avoid them causing yet more isolation. It is easy to react or take things personally, however, compassion is crucial at this time to understand the individual is actually suffering as they adapt to these new changes in their circumstances.

3) Bargaining

Kübler-Ross says this is an often forgotten or silent stage, which often highlights feelings of guilt or “if only I had done things differently...” People find themselves focusing on important deadlines and making silent promises around these.

4) Depression

This is an almost inevitable descent into feeling loss as the person begins to face life in a different or changed way. This is a natural part of the cycle especially when a person is either facing death or bereavement of a loved one. However, to some the loss of a partner through divorce, or the loss of a job through redundancy can feel like a death to them.

5) Acceptance

Where people have been able to express their feelings of anger, grief or sadness and have had support around this, they may come to the stage of acceptance, which is a more neutral position, almost like a surrender where the fighting has stopped and there is a sense of calmness about what is to come.

For some people, even events that are perceived as “positive”, such as getting married or leaving a job to become self-employed, may trigger a similar process as they adapt to the change.

Some suggestions for riding the waves of change

Below are some simple ideas and suggestions, which may be useful for those of us negotiating a period of deep change or transition.

1. Support can be extremely beneficial, talking to a trusted friend, partner, spiritual advisor, counsellor or someone who has experienced a similar event. There are many support groups or “on line” communities and forums you can join.
2. Some people find making sense or meaning out of the situation can be invaluable to their ability to move through change. For example, contemplation on the changing nature of the seasons might help, or exploring how you coped when faced with a similar situation in the past. One person I know developed an understanding of transition as a mythological journey. She created her own story around it and found reading myths and archetypal stories around the hero’s journey, immensely valuable in understanding the cyclical patterns of change.
3. Take care of yourself. Change can bring out vulnerabilities and fears which may lead to erratic lifestyle patterns such as heavy drinking and not eating regularly etc. Remember there is a vulnerable person inside, who may be panicking under all the coping. Simple things like eating well, resting, developing routines or having some form of relaxation technique, e.g. massage or just relaxing baths is supportive to the whole of you.
4. Avoid the temptation to totally isolate. Gather your most trusted friends and explain to them what is happening. Enlist their support in helping you through this time by telling them how they might help you.
5. Acknowledging your feelings and finding a way of expressing can be an important way of moving forward. For example writing down all your fears

can help you to look at them and think about them in a different way to being paralysed by them.

(visit <http://www.wholeheartworks.com/resources/articles.php> for more articles on diffusing fear)

6. If you find yourself feeling immobilised by fear or depression, seek help from your G.P., a qualified counsellor, or psychotherapist. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness but rather courage, strength and shows you are dealing with the issue.
7. Create positive scenarios - if you are going through a career transition, worse case scenarios are a small part of scenario planning which can help to plan sensible contingencies. However, when not balanced with other more positive possibilities, they can cause freezing and panic in the system, causing us to be immobilised.
8. Develop an understanding of change as a process. Perhaps find ways to notice the smaller changes in your body, meditation is a great way to practice this kind of observation as it generally focuses on the breath as a point of awareness.
9. If you know a period of transition is coming up, prepare by making other smaller changes in your routines or habits, e.g. Watching a different television programme, trying a different kind of food, reading a different type of book to the ones you usually do etc.
10. Trust the process!

"Change is not a process for the impatient."

-- Barbara Reinhold

Our services portfolio includes change management consultancy, holistic social responsibility & internal brand consultancy, stress management solutions, facilitation, coaching, workshops, therapeutic interventions and e-support. To find out more information about our services contact Wholeheart Works on 020 8566 4350 or e-mail info@wholeheartworks.com or visit www.wholeheartworks.com