

Stress Less During Life's Many Transitions

By Nan Hayes, Caring Transitions

As experts in the field of home transitions, we are often approached by people who wish to learn more about how they can help support loved ones who are transitioning from one stage of life to the next. In this newsletter, we share some tips and intervention techniques that may help ease stressful situations.

Throughout our lives, we experience countless personal transitions, either by choice or due to circumstances beyond our control. Whether positive or negative, expected or not, all change involves some level of stress – relocating to a new residence, recovering from the loss of a loved one, welcoming a baby, celebrating a promotion, experiencing a financial loss, losing a job, navigating a separation or divorce – all of these life transitions can send stress levels soaring and may leave you or your loved ones feeling overwhelmed, depressed, withdrawn and even angry. You may experience a loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping and cognitive deficiency.

“Life’s big challenges should not be taken lightly, but there is comfort in knowing the right kind of support and clear solutions can improve just about any situation,” said Christopher Seman, President of Caring Transitions.

Focus:

One of the best ways to reduce stress is to determine your ultimate objective and develop an action plan in advance. Large projects are much less daunting when disseminated into smaller, more manageable tasks. Work backward from the end goal to your present life, determining the steps and schedules necessary to achieve it. For example, once you know the date of your estate sale, you can work backward to establish timetables for product displays, promotions, pricing, cleaning, sorting, organizing and meeting with an [estate sale specialist](#), such as Caring Transitions.

Establishing a schedule for projects, meetings and services provides a daily road map and a yardstick by which you can measure progress and celebrate successes along the way. When time permits, it is particularly useful to include a few extra days or hours in the schedule for each task. This helps maintain flexibility in dynamic situations and also promotes positive feelings that come with “being ahead of schedule.”

When setting goals, it’s important to keep them small, measurable and attainable. If the scope of a project is too vast or the ultimate objective is unrealistic, failure to meet expectations can exacerbate symptoms of depression. Instead of saying, “We are going to clean out the entire basement today!” it may be more reasonable to say, “We will clean the basement one hour per day over the next two weeks.”

Community:

A solid support system can make a world of difference when experiencing with a life transition. Go out of your way to reach out to those who may be struggling and connect with friends and family who can provide positive input to the situation. Make time for these connections, but also look for new communities that may offer new insights and more active or direct forms of support. You can locate agencies, organizations, social and support groups that offer care, support and understanding for almost any situation. There is rarely a need to face change alone.

Often, the most important way to help is to simply listen to the stressed individual and allow them the opportunity to voice their concerns. Talking about our fears often helps diminish their influence. It can also help to write down the concerns you or your loved one is facing. In that way, issues can be itemized, prioritized and addressed individually. Try to avoid feeding into fears by elevating them or minimizing them. “Oh my gosh, you must be freaking out! I know I would be!” isn’t any more helpful than, “It’s OK. It’s all right. No need to worry. Everything will be fine.” In fact, all may *not* be fine, and “worry” can often become the basis for good “planning.”

It is best to set aside dedicated time to discuss how someone is feeling about the changes in their life. Too many important communications fall apart when one party doesn’t wait for an appropriate time and place to relay information. Practice listening, without interrupting. Be aware of body language and tone of voice; both yours and the other party. Actions often speak louder than words.

Control:

We all fare better in stressful situations when we have a sense of control over the outcome. Even if we are falling from an airplane, there’s a sense of comfort knowing how and when to pull the parachute. By offering assistance to a friend or loved one, you are offering them a parachute – your willingness to support them. But communicating your desire to help is a two-way conversation. You can be specific about the types of support you wish to provide, but it is typically best if you don’t take action until the other party *accepts* your help. In our zeal to offer help and “fix” situations, we often forget this very important step of *asking permission to help*. When the other party has the option to *choose* where, when and what kind of support they will receive, they feel more in control of the situation. Their sense of independence is temporarily restored, and they may feel less stressed.

Anchors:

We are all attached to our living environments. Our sense of “place” is important to humans at a fundamental and even biological level. When you transition from one place to another, it is useful to focus on favorite possessions and elements of your living space that carry the most comfort and meaning. If you move or remodel, it helps to duplicate some of the styles and settings from your former residence in the new home. This “mirroring” effect provides a sense of continuity; a feeling of comfort. At Caring Transitions, this is one way we make a new, unfamiliar space feel more like “home.” We also encourage people to focus onto personal strengths and values, hold on to familiar objects and to follow familiar routines for mealtimes and bedtimes. All of these help to mitigate symptoms of stress.

Mind, Body, Spirit:

When your life is in turmoil, it is not uncommon to neglect your physical, spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Most people hold stress and tension in muscles, which can lead to difficulty sleeping, headaches, neck and back pain, tight jaws and loss of concentration. You can manage these forms of physical stress through physical exercise or simple breathing techniques (see below).

It is always important to take good care of yourself, but even more so when you are going through a tough time. Dedicate time for four small meals a day that include healthy foods, fluids and supplements. Incorporating more natural foods into your diet and eliminating preservatives, sugars, artificial colors and flavors that come from a “fast food” or “packaged food” may also aid in your digestion.

When you are under stress, it is best to avoid caffeine, which may contribute to feelings of panic and anxiety. Eat meals well ahead of bedtime, as digesting that late-night snack may interfere with a sound sleep.

Every situation is unique and while all of the above interventions may not be appropriate in every situation, they can help to improve personal resilience, communication, community support, communications and planning. Your objective

should be to extend a hand, letting those you love know you care and are willing to contribute to a better overall life transition experience. At Caring Transitions, our objective is the same; to create positive outcomes for our clients and those around them.

As one client recently wrote, "I want to thank you for helping with my move and my sale, but most of all, thank you for helping with my stress, my sister's stress and my brother's stress!"

Stress-Release Breathing Exercise

When you begin to feel anxious, focusing on your breathing for just four breaths can help restore a feeling of wellbeing and control.

1. Take note of tension in your jaw, shoulders and muscles of your face, etc. Tell yourself to "let go" of any tension you find.
2. As you breathe in slowly, count to the number "1." Some people like to say the word "1" silently or picture the number "1" mentally.
3. As you exhale slowly, count to the number "2." As you exhale allow yourself to "release" unwanted stress, anxiety and pain with the breath, so it flows out and away.
4. On the next breath, slowly inhale and count to the number "3." As you exhale, count the number "4," and release your stress and anxiety.

Repeat this for "5" inhale, "6" exhale, "7" inhale, and "8" exhale.

This traditional yoga exercise takes most people less than one minute, yet has a powerful effect of releasing tensions and getting you back to the "present" in a positive way.

About Caring Transitions

As life changes, it may become necessary to leave a familiar home and part with personal belongings in order to downsize and relocate to a smaller home or retirement community. At Caring Transitions, we help our clients understand the process, evaluate their options and make informed decisions that suit their best interests. We are committed to making each client's experience positive by minimizing stress and maximizing results.

Visit us online at www.CaringTransitions.com.

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