

## Managing change transitions

**A**re you approaching a change transition in your life, perhaps from being a student to a practitioner, from being single to married, or from having a full house to an empty nest as your children leave home? Maybe you are thinking about a new position, renewing your career, or retirement, each of which is a major change transition. To successfully adapt to changes that occur in your life, you need to make a transition with each change.

Transitions differ from changes, and it is these transitions that cause us difficulty. *Transitions* are the psychological processes people go through to come to terms with a new situation. Changes occur externally; transitions occur internally. When we make transitions, we must let go of an old situation, enter the confusing nowhere of the in-between, and launch forth into a new situation. Transitions therefore comprise the disorientation and reorientation that mark the turning points on our path of growth. We must recognize that real effort is required to regain our “inner home” in a transition. Every transition is an ending that prepares the ground for new growth and activities. For example, recent retirees must learn to navigate the transition in motivation from demonstrating competence to finding meaning. The shift from the question of “how” to the question of “why” requires a significant transition.

*The Success Skills column provides practical advice to help pharmacists become more effective in their professional and personal lives. Installments are contributed by and reflect the views of Sara J. White, M.S., FASHP, Pharmacy Leadership Coach, Mountain View, CA.*

Transitions can take tolls on our physical, mental, and social states. We identify ourselves with the circumstances of our lives, so who we think we are is partly defined by the roles and relationships that we have, both those we like and those we do not. It is important to clarify how much of your experience in any transition period is actually yours and how much is a cultural expectation of how you are supposed to feel. Our reaction to a transition is not necessarily related to the apparent importance of the change, even if the change was your idea. Unless transitions occur, change will not be successful.

Successful transitions consist of an ending, a neutral zone, and a new beginning. These steps must be managed in this order for the transition to be effective.

**Endings.** Successful transitions must begin with an appropriate ending of the current situation. You have to leave the present behind. Endings can cause us to become angry, sad, frightened, depressed, and confused. It may be help-

ful to remember that yesterday’s ending launched today’s successes. In breaking the old connections to the world, the way you have defined yourself and your life may no longer seem correct because everything has changed. Reflect on your previous change experiences to determine how you have dealt with such change in the past. Is it abrupt and designed to deny the impact of the change, or has it been slow and gradual? In past transition situations, have you been active or passive with endings? Is it your initiative that brings things to term, or do events seem to just happen to you? Your answers may vary depending on whether the change is in your personal life or in your workplace.

Endings allow you to explore the other side of change and clear the way for new growth. Endings break our connection with the settings in which we have come to know ourselves, and they can awaken old memories of hurt and shame. Recognize that endings are felt as losses, and think about ways to compensate for the losses. If the loss will be a manual system that you are very familiar with or your

old work routine, list the advantages of the new system or routine. To deal with the loss, clearly describe what must be let go and how you are feeling in as much detail as possible. Document your descriptions, as the documentation forces you to face your losses. It may be helpful to discuss the transition with a mentor, coworker, or trusted friend, as verbal-



izing your feelings can help you think it through. If you know anyone who has been through a similar transition, ask him or her to tell you about the experience and what helped ease the transition. In this process, don't denigrate what has to end or think of it as wrong. The decisions made in the past and the activities were correct at the time.

A method to achieve a successful ending is to formally mark it with actions or activities that dramatize it, such as having a party. Inviting others to the celebration encourages you to honor the past and put it in perspective.

**Neutral zone.** After a successful ending, you must endure the neutral zone—a no man's land between the old reality and the new. The neutral zone may begin with a feeling of disenchantment, but slowly you will begin to see the disenchantment experience as meaningful. The fact that things are up in the air now and that you sometimes feel that you are right back where you started is not a sign that you have made a mistake or have been wasting your time. Rather, the neutral zone represents a journey from one identity to another. Necessary reorientation and redefinition occur in the neutral zone, where creative, renewal, and development opportunities are waiting to be recognized.

Described another way, the neutral zone feels like you have cast away the shell of your old identity like a lobster and are staying close to the rocks because you are still soft and vulnerable. You know you will have a new and better fitting identity in time, but for now you have to move slowly.

To successfully handle the neutral zone, you need to surrender to the emptiness in order to escape it. The neutral zone provides a unique view of life, and

it is a succession of such views over a lifetime that produces wisdom. Expect old fears to be awakened, so take care of yourself in little ways, such as exercising, getting enough sleep, and eating right. Talking with a trusted mentor or friend about your fears may also help you to understand your feelings.

Making the best use of the neutral zone involves finding a regular time and place to be alone, away from the familiar distractions. Consider taking a few days to go on your own version of a retreat. You might begin a log or journal of neutral zone experiences and document what you really think is going on, how you feel, what puzzling or unusual things have happened, and what decisions you wish you could make. Another approach is to take this pause in the action of your life to write your autobiography, because in seeing where you have been, you can tell where you are going. This is an opportunity for you to step back, take stock, reassess, and experiment. It provides you the opportunity to consider your possibilities in a new light by breaking free of yesterday's view of things and generating a new list of possibilities. Take this opportunity to discover what you really want by asking yourself, "If I only could, what would I do?"

**New beginnings.** The new beginning is the desired change, such as a new computer system, new job responsibilities, or a child going to college. Having successfully ended the current situation and benefitted from the neutral zone, you are ready to embrace the change. Don't be surprised if even in this final step some of the old anxieties triggered by the ending are reactivated, as change always represents a gamble with no guarantees.

To have a successful new beginning or change, begin to identify yourself

with the final result of the change as if it has successfully happened. Visualize the change, using as many specifics as possible. See and experience yourself as successfully adapting to the change. If helpful, list or describe the advantages of the change so you focus on the positive aspects instead of allowing fears of what may go wrong to dominate. Expect to encounter some challenges that you haven't anticipated and envision yourself being able to handle these challenges. Always see problems as challenges and opportunities, not obstacles. Finally, be patient with yourself and take the change one step at a time. Be gentle with yourself, and acknowledge that it is going to take a little time to become fully functional with the change. It might be useful to celebrate small successes of the change, such as surviving the first day, week, or month.

**Conclusion.** Change transition can be eased by understanding the need to have a formal ending, to endure the neutral zone, and then to have a new beginning.

#### Suggested readings

Bridges W. *Managing transitions: making the most of change.* New York: Addison-Wesley; 1991.

Bridges W. *Transitions: making sense of life's changes.* New York: Addison-Wesley; 1980.

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