

CHANGE



Managing Life Transitions *by Melinda Phillips*

Many transitions, large and small, occur at the beginning of the calendar year in Australia. Children start primary school for the first time and young people may start high school, their senior secondary years, or further study. Family relocations due to work or study may take place over the long summer break, and new jobs may also commence. We know that change is an inevitable part of life, however sometimes we don't see the broader impact of life transitions until we are trying to deal with the consequences.

The *Seasons for Growth*® programs are based on the grief theory of J William Worden (2009). Worden created four tasks to describe the experience of grief after bereavement – the tasks are not linear, or sequential, and individuals may experience more than one task at once and revisit each of the tasks many times. The *Seasons for Growth*® programs draw on these tasks in understanding all experiences of change and loss, not just bereavement. The tasks highlight useful points to consider when managing the changes and losses that come with life transitions.

Task One: Accept the reality of the change or loss

Lovely anecdotes abound about small children, who, after attending their first day or week of school, declare that they've finished with school and are ready to go back to how life was. Similarly, the shock of high school's size and speed, or the scale and freedom of university life, or the unfamiliarity of a new job can have the most well-adjusted person in firm agreement with our five year old friends. However, one cannot go backwards in life. Change is inevitable and working toward accepting both the reality and the significance of the transition readies people to participate in the new experience.

Supporting children, young people and adults with accepting the reality of the change:

- Keep to some routines (where possible), or establish new routines. Routines give time and mental space for changes to be processed and accepted.
- Not everything changes. Take the time to remember and enjoy the parts of life that are staying the same.
- Rituals can help. Participating in end of year concerts and parties, farewell work dinners and small, personal/family rituals can help people of all ages come to terms with the change. Orientation days, welcome morning teas and other occasions serve a similar purpose in marking new beginnings.
- Remind people in transition that they are not alone. Many people will be experiencing similar thoughts, feelings and challenges if they too are starting or changing school, further study, jobs or locations.

Task Two: Work through the pain of grief

Change and loss impacts on each of us differently and people experience and express their hurt in a variety of ways. Each person will need to work through a range of reactions – thoughts and self-talk (why did I take this job? will I make friends?), feelings (fear, anxiety, sadness, excitement), physical responses (headaches, stomach upsets, sleep changes) and behaviours (withdrawing, need for rest, hyped behaviour). This work takes time and energy for both children and adults.

Supporting children, young people and adults to work through the pain of grief:

- Bodies are under stress in times of change and transition. Self-care needs to be a priority – eat properly, drink enough water, sleep well, fit in a little exercise and spend some time outside.

- Listen to how they are thinking and feeling. Remind people that they have your support.
- Talk about what works for you when feelings of sadness, frustration or loneliness arise.
- Remember past successes. Previous changes and transitions that have been managed can serve as a useful reminder for people of their personal strengths and provide confidence for the future.

Task Three: Adjust to the new environment

This task varies greatly from person to person, depending on what new skills might be needed. Children, young people and adults need personal skills, relationship skills and learning skills to succeed in unfamiliar learning environments (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo and Cavanagh, 2011).

Supporting children, young people and adults to adjust to a new environment:

- New surroundings can be daunting. Take the time to become familiar with the new environment and new travel routines.
- Personal skills: encourage positive self-talk and problem solving. Talking about past examples of these can help children and young people draw on previous experience.
- Relationship skills: People need a sense of belonging in their new environment. Social skills (saying hello, smiling, making eye contact, and listening) are skills that can be practiced at home, and can help children, young people and adults make connections with others.
- Learning skills: asking for help and information is how people learn and is normal behaviour in a new environment (whether school or workplace). Encourage help-seeking as a worthwhile learning strategy that builds independence and confidence.
- Build in down time. Adjusting to a new environment can be physically and mentally draining, so make sure there is time to relax in favourite ways – familiar TV shows, hanging out with friends or the family pet, reading or playing sport.

Task Four: Find an ongoing connection with what's been lost while living in the new, changed world

As time passes, the new way of things generally gets a little easier. Routines are established, friendships and connections are made, and the environment becomes more familiar. Children, young people and adults most often move into a space with they can look forward, and be pleased with small, achievable steps toward new goals. However, this does not mean the connection with what was needs to be lost – some precious parts of how things were may be able to be part of the new world, or at least remembered and talked about.

Supporting children, young people and adults to maintain ongoing connections while living in the new, changed world:

- Provide opportunities to talk about how things used to be, as well as how they are right now.
- Make sure connections and support are available. Maintaining different friendships (from past and present, inside and outside school and work) can help ensure there are people around to talk to or share stories with.
- Be flexible with additional support or time to participate in day-to-day life and get tasks done.
- Sometimes people need additional support to manage changes and transitions. If the child, young person or adult doesn't seem to be coping talk with them about it, and be ready to speak to appropriate people for additional support.

Change is a normal and natural part of life. People are often surprised by the experience of hurt and sadness alongside excitement and happiness as a result of life's transitions. It can be reassuring to know there are things people can do to actively manage big life changes or support others to manage. If you are helping somebody manage a life transition, some of the small gestures of support described above can show that although you know change can be hard, you believe in their capacity to cope and, in time, flourish in their new environment.

References:

Hirst, M., Jervis, N., Visagie, K., Sojo, V. & Cavanagh, S. (2011). Transition to primary school: a review of the literature. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Worden (2009). Grief counselling and grief therapy: A Handbook for the mental health practitioner. Fourth edition. New York: Springer Publishing Company.