



TRANSITION and STRESS: Surviving and Thriving in the Midst of Change

During our adult lifetimes, we move through many changes and transitions. Even when the changes are good and desired, there may be conflicting feelings about them. The primary purpose of this brochure is to assist those United Methodist clergy and their families who are in the transition process from one appointment to another. Topics for discussion include: stages of transition, emotional issues of grief and loss, biological implications of stress and change, coping skills, spiritual aspects and resources for the process. In transitions, it is endings that begin the cycle of change, rather than beginnings. Compare the transition cycle to nature's seasons of autumn, winter, and spring; an ending, a time of emptiness or waiting, and a time of re-growth. May these thoughts and concepts help you journey through your present transition.

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***Be strong and let your heart
take courage***

Ps 31:24

Stages of Transition

The definition of transition is a passage from one place or stage to another. Transitions involve in-betweenness. When most of us are faced with a transition, we usually jump ahead to what is beginning, rather than viewing transition as a process between what was and what will be. William Bridges in his book, Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes views the whole of our life as a cycle of transition;

- 1) a series of endings followed by
- 2) periods of confusion leading to
- 3) new beginnings.

Begin with Endings

Transition always begins with an ending; the closing of a chapter in one's life; whether that is a change in job/vocation, education, relationships, health, marital status, location of your home, or your inner self-image. Endings are the first part of the natural pattern of dying, chaos, and renewal that is present in God's universe. Endings are the clearing process that prepares you for personal growth and development. It is important to emotionally and psychologically deal with the endings that happen within our life cycle so that we can move towards what is next.

The Neutral Zone

The neutral zone is a time of inner re-orientation. It is the true "in-between" phase of transition;

in between the death of the past and the birth of the future. A general feeling of emptiness reigns within the person. The neutral zone phase is a time of important inner work. Most people who are in this phase want to spend time alone and away from familiar distractions. During this time alone, the person doesn't really **do** any kind of purposeful activity. Rather, a "timeout" is taken from the usual everyday activities as the person reflects on what has been and will be. It is a transformative time, a time of inner growth as the old life is dismantled and an image of the new life is constructed.

Beginnings

Most of the time, we associate beginnings with our external world; a new job, a new relationship, or a new location. Rather, genuine beginnings are of the inner self. A beginning isn't so much an outward goal as much as an inward resonance. There is an inner alignment with deep longings which cause a renewal of energy and powerful motivation. One feels a compulsion to take action and to start.

Genuine beginnings take time, however. We think that the beginning is done when the wedding is over, the new job is started, or we have moved into the new house. But in reality, the inner identification process is still happening. Be gentle with yourself as you live into your new image, role, or chapter. The transition process really is a cycle that keeps repeating itself throughout our life-journey.



Grief During Transition

Most of us do not realize that the grief process is activated any time we feel a loss in our life. In reality, there is a death of our present circumstances and self-image. Grief is a normal and natural emotion during a loss. It is also necessary to the transition process. In order to get to the new beginning, we need to emotionally deal with the ending. At the basic level, grief during transition includes:

- 1) *Denial and depression*: that the change or transition is happening;
- 2) *Negotiating*: what you will or won't do to facilitate the change or transition.
- 3) *Acceptance or Cooperation*: your willingness to participate in the change or transition.



Activation of Grief

The grief process is often activated when we first realize that a significant change is probable. Within the itinerant system of United Methodist clergy, the emotional process of a possible transition may be triggered by the annual evaluation that happens in the latter part of the year, either within the local church or with the District office. Depending upon the person, the grief process may take between 12 to 18 months.

Coping with Emotions

During the time when you are considering the possibility of a "pastoral re-location", your emotions are riding a roller-coaster.

The following may help you in the processing of those emotions:

- 1) Why do you want this change?
- 2) What will be different?
- 3) What will you be losing?

- 4) What will you be gaining?
- 5) List your reasons and emotions of resistance.
- 6) Listen to your inner-self.

Allow yourself time to process the transition you are facing. Most of the time, fear is the major emotion that paralyzes us in transitions. As you move through the grief process, work through your fear.

Stress Reactions to Transitions

Stress is caused by the way we perceive, think, and react to events, changes, and people in our lives. Usually major changes in our lives, either positive or negative, cause us to feel stressed. This is mainly due to the fact that change is perceived by humans as a threat and is undesirable. Even though we view change as unwanted and uncomfortable, change can also lead to personal growth and development.



Responses to Stress

Generally, humans move into an alarm state, both physically and psychologically, in response to stress and change. We have an increase in our heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, and adrenaline. Our body has shifted in to high gear to deal with the perceived threat. We are ready to take action.

Due to biological differences, men and women take different actions.

Men, due to the hormone, testosterone, generally react with a fight or flight response. By fighting, the threat is eliminated and by fleeing, the threat is avoided. Therefore, men may demonstrate defensive and assertive type behaviors. Persons who are more introverted may use avoidance-type behaviors. These coping mechanisms may or may not be effective or healthy.

Women, on the other hand, react to stress with "a tend and befriend" response. This is due to the hormone, oxytocin, and is related to the women's role as the nurturing care-taker of the family. During stressful times, women will calm themselves and their family by initiating caring and beneficial activities with and for family members. An essential coping skill for women is gathering with other women to process and strategize during the stressful situation. If women try to cope with their stress in isolation without input from other women, their mental and emotional health is at risk.



Coping Skills

Both men and women may experience high blood pressure, headaches, ulcers, heart pain, mental, emotional, and physical fatigue during stressful times. What are healthy ways to defuse the stress?

#1: Become involved in a physical activity. Walking, biking, swimming, bowling, martial arts, anything that moves your body. Physical activity decreases the stress hormone adrenalin, and increases the calming hormone endorphin.

Activity also helps with the other physical symptoms of stress.

#2: Especially for women, talk over your stressful situation with 1-3 trusted persons. Being able to process and verbally express your worries and concerns is important in managing your stress.

#3: Practice positive self-care habits;

- \$ nutritional meals, not fast-foods;
- \$ enough rest and sleep,
- \$ decrease caffeine intake,
- \$ laughter and positive self-talk,
- \$ make lists
- \$ trust God

Letting Go and Letting God

As we face transition, we try to do it alone. We leave out God.

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jer. 29:11)

The Spiritual Disciplines of scripture-reading, prayer, meditation, journaling, and meeting in a support/study group place us before God so that God can transform and heal us. The Disciplines are also an excellent way to strengthen your inner resources as you cope with change and transition.

By inviting God into the transition process, you will be more able to cope with the confusion and chaos. God=s power and strength heals the hurts of the endings, illuminates your inner journey, and brings peace as you face the unknowns of the not yet.



Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It is wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. (Phil 4:6-7 The Message)

Resources

Transitions: Making Sense of Life=s Changes by William Bridges (1980)

Who Moved My Cheese? by Spencer Johnson (1998)

Saying Goodbye: A time for Growth for Congregations & Pastors by Edward White

New Beginnings: A Pastorate Start-up workbook by Roy Oswald

Running Through the Thistles: Terminating a Ministerial Relationship with a Parish by Roy Oswald

Making a Good Move: Opening the Door to a Successful Pastorate by Michael Coyner (2000)

Ordering Your Private World by Gordon MacDonald (1985)

Praying Our Goodbyes by Joyce Rupp (1988)

The Berenstain Bears' Moving Day by Stan and Jan Berenstain (1981)