



A Healthy Outlook!

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Managing Difficult Life Transitions

Life is a process of beginnings and endings. In both life and nature, there are times when things move slowly and don't seem to change very much. Then, suddenly, things change quickly. Moving from August to September, the weather changes gradually at first, and then it seems that suddenly summer is over. It is the same in our lives; transitions are as natural as the changing seasons. Life transitions are challenging because they force us to let go of the familiar and face the future with a feeling

of vulnerability. Most life transitions begin with a string of losses:

- The loss of a role
- The loss of a person
- The loss of a place
- The loss of your sense of where you fit in the world

Life transitions can include accidents; buying a house; changing jobs; divorce; getting married; having a baby; leaving for college; relocation; retirement; sell-

ing a house; serious illness; significant loss (of a person, job, pet, or anything important); or starting a career.

Stages of Life Transitions

Successfully moving through a life transition usually means experiencing the following stages:

- Experiencing a range of negative feelings (anger, anxiety, confusion, numbness, self-doubt).
- Feeling a loss of self-esteem.
- Beginning to accept the change.
- Acknowledging that you need to let go of the past and accept the future.
- Beginning to feel hopeful about the future.

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Why Worry?

Do you worry about things that you can't control? Worrying is harmful. It adds to stress. But people often say they "can't help" worrying. Some people worry about everything. Worrying doesn't make a problem go away. In fact, it often makes the problem worse. Worrying keeps people from facing their problem and trying to solve them. If you are worrying about a problem, ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the problem?
2. Is it really a problem? (What signs show you that it is a problem? What do you think those signs mean? Are there other ways to look at things?)
3. How important is the problem? (What would happen if you did nothing about it? What would happen if you stopped worrying?)

4. Can you do anything about the problem? (Can you change whether it will happen? Can you change its outcome?)
5. Did it already happen? (Did it affect you or someone else? Is it likely to happen again? How likely? Can you prevent it?)
6. Are you responsible for doing something about the problem? (Why? Do others agree that you are responsible? How do you know?)

You may find that there is nothing you can do to change the problem. Or that someone else is responsible for the problems. If that is the case, try to stop worrying. And remember, that the EAP is always available to help you learn to worry less and enjoy life more.

Taken from Managing Stress, American Institute for Preventive Medicine.

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- **Feeling a rise in self-esteem.**
- **Developing an optimistic view of the future.**

The process of moving through a transition does not always proceed in order of these nice, predictable stages. People usually move through the process in different ways, often cycling back and forth among the stages.

Coping Skills

Life transitions are often difficult, but they have a positive side, too. They provide us with an opportunity to assess the direction our lives are taking. They are a chance to grow and learn. Here are some ideas that may help make the process rewarding.

Accept that change is a normal part of life. People who have this attitude seem to have the easiest time getting through life transitions. Seeing changes as negative or as experiences that must be avoided makes them more difficult to navigate and less personally productive.

Identify your values and life goals. If a person knows who he/she is and what he/she wants from life, he/she may see the change as just another life challenge. Such people are willing to take responsibility for their actions and not blame others for the changes that come along without warning.

Learn to identify and express your feelings. While it's normal to try to push away feelings of fear and anxiety, you will move through them more quickly if you acknowledge them. Make them real by writing them down and talking about them with trusted friends and family members. These feelings will have less power over you if you face them and express them.

Focus on the payoffs. Think about what you have learned from other life transitions. Recall the stages you went through, and identify what you

gained and learned from each experience. Such transitions can provide a productive time to do some important self-exploration. They can be a chance to overcome fears and to learn to deal with uncertainty. These can be the gifts of the transition process—to learn more about yourself and what makes you happy and fulfilled.

Don't be in a rush. When your life is disrupted, it takes time to adjust to the new reality. Expect to feel uncomfortable during a transition as you let go of old ways of doing things. Try to avoid starting new activities too soon, before you have had a chance to reflect and think about what is really best for you.

Expect to feel uncomfortable. A time of transition is confusing and disorienting. It is normal to feel insecure and anxious. These feelings are part of the process, and they will pass.

Stay sober. Using alcohol or drugs during this confusing time is not a good idea. It can only make the process more difficult.

Take good care of yourself. Transitions are very stressful, even if they are supposed to be happy times. You may not feel well enough to participate in your normal activities. Find something fun to do for yourself each day. Get plenty of rest and exercise, and eat well.

Build your support system. Seek the support of friends and family members, especially those who accept you without judging you and encourage you to express your true feelings. A time of transition also is an excellent time to seek the support of a mental health professional. He or she can guide you through the transition process in a safe, supportive environment.

Acknowledge what you are leaving behind. This is the first step to accept-

ing the new. Think about how you respond to endings in your life: Do you generally avoid them, like the person who ducks out early on her last day on the job because she can't bear to say good-bye? Or do you drag them out because you have such a hard time letting go? Perhaps you make light of endings, refusing to let yourself feel sad. Before you can welcome the new, you must acknowledge and let go of the old.

Keep some things consistent. When you are experiencing a significant life change, it helps to keep as much of your daily routine consistent as you can.

Accept that you may never completely understand what has happened to you. You are likely to spend a lot of time feeling confused and afraid. This makes most of us very uncomfortable. The discomfort and confusion will pass, and clarity will return.

Take one step at a time. It's understandable to feel like your life has become unmanageable. To regain a sense of power, find one small thing you can control right now. Then break it down into small, specific, concrete steps. Write them down and post them on your computer monitor or mirror. Cross off each step as you accomplish it.

Times of life transitions offer you the chance to explore what your ideal life would look like. When things are in disarray, you can reflect on the hopes and dreams you once had but perhaps forgot about. Take this time to write about them in a journal or talk about them with a trusted friend or therapist. Now is a good time to take advantage of the fork in the road.

Adapted from an article by Herb Cantor, Ph.D. Used with permission.

Having Conflict? Welcome to the MCPS Dispute Resolution Program

Conflict is inevitable. When people work together, disagreements can lead to conflict. Usually people can resolve this conflict with little or no input from others. However, sometimes people need help to resolve their differences. The Dispute Resolution Program provides free mediation services to MCPS employees who would like help resolving workplace conflict. Whether it is a matter of feeling disrespected, dealing with someone who's always late, or working with someone who encroaches on your personal space, mediation can help. With the assistance of a neutral mediator, provided through an agreement with the Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County, people are able to find their own solutions to problems. A private, informal, confidential agreement may help you resume a more workable relationship with someone with whom you've had difficulties.

To learn more, or to schedule a mediation at a convenient time and place, call the Dispute Resolution Program at the EAP at 301-460-2425.

National Depression Screening Day

National Depression Screening Day is October 6. The EAP will be conducting screenings for Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. If you think you or a member of your family might have one of these mental health issues, please call the EAP at 301-460-2100 to schedule an appointment for a screening. Screenings take no more than 30 minutes and include an opportunity to discuss your results with a trained mental health professional.

Recipe for a Successful Marriage

Researcher John Gottman claims to be able to predict, in five minutes, those marriages that will end in divorce with 91 percent accuracy. For more than two decades, this professor of psychology at the University of Washington has interviewed hundreds of couples at his Family Research Institute, also known as the "Love Lab." This research has revealed four behaviors that can kill a relationship if they are not curbed—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

Gottman proceeds to explain factors which are essential for successful marriages. In one surprising revelation, Gottman claims that friendship is more important than communication. "At the heart of my program is the simple truth that happy marriages are based on a deep friendship," he asserts. "By this I mean a mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other's company. They have an abiding regard for each other and express this fondness not just in the big ways but in the little ways, day in and day out."

While it seems unlikely that the perfect recipe for a successful marriage may be developed, Gottman offers interesting insights and helpful techniques for improving marriage. His book, *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert*, provides further information. It is published by Three Rivers Press, Michigan, and is available in bookstores.

Quote:

"When you do the common things in life in an uncommon way, you will command the attention of the world."

—George Washington Carver
(1864–1943)

Web Sources for Health Information

According to the *Washington Post* (June 21, 2005), the following Web sites were considered excellent sources of health information:

www.nih.gov

Sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, has lots of general information on a wide range of topics.

www.my.webmd.com

Lots of information on numerous topics.

www.mayoclinic.com

Sponsored by the Mayo Clinic for Medical Education and Research. Geared to consumers seeking health information.

www.medicinenet.com

Articles written by physicians and reviewed by a team of health professionals.

www.kidshealth.com

Sponsored by Nemours Foundations Center for Children's Health. Lots of content focused on children's health.

www.medscape.com

Sponsored by WebMd, for consumers who want professional-level articles on health-related topics.



Upcoming Events

EAP Workshops:

• **September 28, 2005**

The Sandwich Generation: Caregiver Resources and Information: 4:00–5:00 p.m., at the MCEA conference center (60 W. Gude Dr.), rooms ABC

• **October 18, 2005**

Stress Management: 4:00–5:00 p.m., Montgomery Blair High School

• **November 16, 2005**

Managing the Stress of the Holidays: 4:00–5:00 p.m., North Lake Center (15101 Bauer Dr.), Rockville, Media Center

• **December 13, 2005**

Managing the Stress of the Holidays: 12:00–1:00 p.m., Central Office (850 Hungerford Dr.), room 223

• **April 26, 2006**

Substance Abuse Information for Parents: What You Need to Know: 12:00–1:00 p.m., (850 Hungerford Dr.), room 120

To RSVP, please call us at 301-460-2100 or contact us via e-mail at Cynthia_Thompson@mcpsmd.org

If you have questions or would like to talk about EAP workshops, please call us at 301-460-2100.

Ask the EAP

Q. Can the EAP be used more than one time in a given year?

A. Yes. Generally speaking, the EAP is intended to provide short-term counseling and referral services. While the EAP is not intended to be used for ongoing counseling, it's certainly available to those who may experience more than one incident in a given year—the short-term counseling benefit may be accessed for each incident. If someone is coming to the EAP for the same incident multiple times, it is likely that the person needs a referral to a long-term service; and the counselor would discuss that with the you.

Do you have a question for the EAP? Send your questions via FirstClass, Outlook, or the Pony to Jeff Becker.

10 Reasons to Recognize Your Staff

As we return for another school year, supervisors and administrators once again face the challenge of how best to retain a productive and motivated staff. According to the National Association of Employee Recognition (there is such an association!), it is suggested that you recognize staff members when they model behavior that exemplifies any of the following:

1. Innovation
2. Initiative
3. Loyalty
4. Leadership
5. Teamwork
6. Creativity
7. Efficiency
8. Quality
9. Superior Service
10. A Positive Attitude

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EAP Workshops

Did you know that the EAP is available to come to your school or office and present one of our workshops? Throughout the year, we offer many workshops that are available to all employees. However, if you would like the EAP to tailor a workshop to your staff's needs, please contact us to discuss what you want us to do and when. Topics currently include the following:

- Stress Management
- Time Management
- Managing the Stress of Relationships
- Overcoming Burnout
- Stress and Its Impact on Your Health
- Four Steps to Better Workplace Relationships
- Anger Management: Real Strategies for Real Life



A Healthy Outlook

To help employees with troubling issues before they become overwhelming.



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE

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Important Notice: Information in A Healthy Outlook! is for general information purposes only and is not intended to replace the counsel or advice of a qualified health professional.

For further questions or help with specific problems or personal concerns contact your employee assistance professional.

You may contact us or send your questions and comments to Debra_Tipton@fc.mcps.k12.md.us.

Please note that e-mail is not necessarily confidential.