

Life Transitions: Out With the Old, In With The New - And Everything In Between.

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The end of a year and beginning of a new one provides a noticeable opportunity to think about transitions whether large or small, predictable or unexpected. Given that clients commonly present during times of personal transition, there is surprisingly little written on the topic. Contrast this to the vast amounts of literature on resilience, stress and coping. I thought it was worth taking a closer look and offer one model for review.

The word transition originated from the latin word Transire, meaning “go across” and is defined as “the process or period of changing from one state to another”(Macquarie dictionary). The terms “Transition” and “Change” are often used interchangeably. It is important to highlight that a change is considered situational, such as the birth of a baby, a new job or a move. On the contrary, the process of being in transition is the inner experience a person undergoes to the situational changes occurring. For example, the experience of lostness and disorientation that comes with life events such as the death of a loved one, divorce or retirement. It is this transitional period that provides opportunity for redefinition and personal growth.

In 1909 French Anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep described the importance of “Rites of Passage” and the three stages of transition; Separation, Liminality and Incorporation. Ancient cultures and tribal societies enabled personal transformation through ceremonial rituals. It is argued that our society has become increasingly distracted by external changes and events with a tendency to focus on the ending or beginning rather than the in-between. Van Gennep describes this as similar to being in a house with many rooms separated by a corridor. The human tendency can be to hurry from room to room avoiding spending time in the corridor.

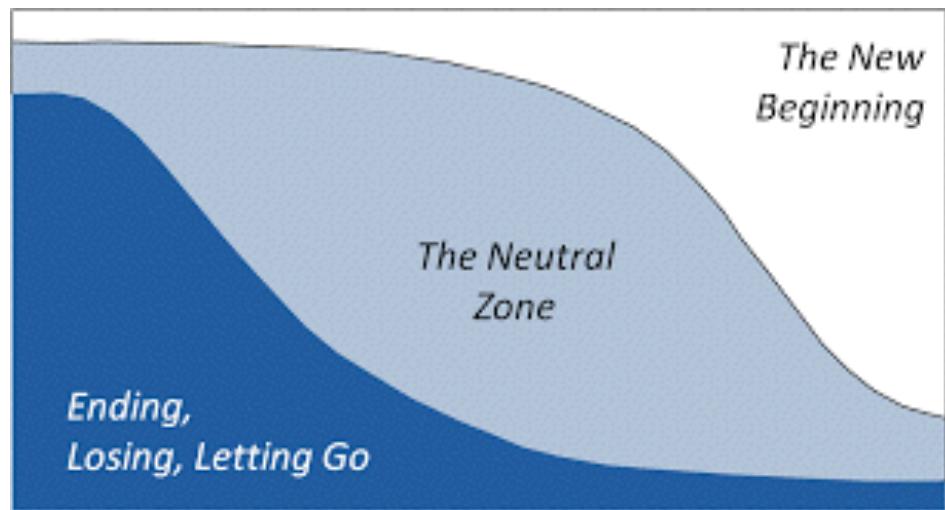
William Bridges in his book, “Transitions-Making Sense of Life’s Changes” aims to illuminate the lostness and confusion encountered when people pass through transitions. He reminds us of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and her experience of chasing the rabbit down a hole. Alice finds herself in a chaotic and topsy turvy world, experiencing confusion and fear. She encounters unusual creatures, her tears become a river and she can suddenly shrink



to a few centimetres or grow to be enormous. Bridges' term for this is the "Neutral Zone", also called "liminality", the state of having left one place but having not yet fully entered the next. Without an understanding of this process, people can feel like Alice at the bottom of the rabbit hole, dazed and lonely. Helping people understand the importance of these passages is the main purpose of Bridges' model.

The Transition Process

Bridge's model was initially designed for facilitating change in organisations however has been expanded for use on a personal level. The model is comprised of three stages; Ending, Neutral Zone and Beginning. I will now explore each stage more in detail.



Ending, (Losing, Letting go):

This phase can be likened to dying itself, often bringing thoughts such as "this is the end of me". People are likely to experience a sense of fear, emptiness and abandonment, a sense of disintegration and "falling apart". There is a strong desire to escape these feelings.

How can we help clients in the Ending Phase:

- **Accept and allow** the inner distress that is being stirred up.
- **Talk about what is lost.** The ending of a relationship may bring loss of an important role, loss of security, loss of a familiar context or familiar ways of knowing oneself. The focus may at times go to practical issues however guidance to inner experience is encouraged.
- **Explore the idea of being in "Mourning"** (Bridges calls this Dismantling). Discuss practical ways to symbolically experience or "make" an ending. For example some cultures hold a vigil, a ceremony or a prescribed period of time of wearing black. The word dismantling suggests the deconstruction of an old way of being in preparation for a new chapter.
- **Explore characteristic ways of coping with endings.** Recall past endings and think about typical responses, feelings and thoughts. Consider that some emotions stirred up with the current ending are often a product of past endings and memories. Enable clients to discover their transitional "style" which may be built on childhood and family experiences.

The Ending Phase involves "Letting go of something that you have believed or assumed, some way you've always seen yourself, an outlook on the world or an attitude to others" (Bridges 2004: 129)

The Neutral Zone:

“The neutral zone is a time when inner re-orientation and realignment are occurring, a time when we are making a shift from one season of life to the next” (Bridges 2004:154). This is a time where nothing feels solid, an in-between time, bringing a sense of “life being on hold”. There is often a temporary cessation of regular activities and a lack of direction, purpose and social connection.

How can we help clients in the Neutral Zone:

- **Take time away** to a simple, unfamiliar place or set aside a time in the day that gives opportunity for reflection. In ancient times it was common for a person to leave the village and enter into the wilderness or unfamiliar place. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert as did Moses and Buddha during critical life points.
- **Write your life story / autobiography.** At times the past isn't exactly as a person thought it to be. Events thought to be a particular way may have turned out to be different. By seeing these discrepancies, it can be considered that the present and future may also shape up to be different.
- **Write a letter to yourself.** Outlining the dreams, convictions, hopes and plans that have not yet been achieved. Think about what you would want to do if given a new life chapter to begin.
- **Resist the urge to press the Reverse or Fast Forward button.** Acknowledge and expect the desire to go back to the way things were or to hurry things up.

The New Beginning:

This phase often brings feelings of optimism, excitement, curiosity, impatience and acceptance. It can also bring a desire to control and plan. While some beginnings are planned they often have an accidental quality to them.

How can we help clients in the Beginning Phase:

- **Explore characteristic ways of coping with new beginnings.** Consider how new chapters have previously opened in life. Is there a tendency to bring on a new beginning prematurely in order to avoid uncertainty? Is there a tendency to resist change?
- **Understand self doubt and inner resistance.** Explore fundamental beliefs that undermine decision making.
- **Notice opportunities** that may be subtle or unplanned. Sometimes an accidental event can provide an unexpected possibility.
- **Make realistic plans and act on them.** Ask clients to imagine and “experience” themselves in the new situation. Remember that set-backs are to be expected and preoccupation with a set outcome can be unhelpful.

In summary

In contrast to fearing the transition process, an understanding of its purpose allows people to face the experience with less fear and resistance. In thinking about Alice down the Rabbit hole, it's reassuring to consider that “despite feeling lonely down there, there are more people there than you may realise” (Bridges 2004:155). Therapist's accompanying

their clients in transition have a unique opportunity to facilitate adjustment and highlight opportunities for personal growth.

References

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