

**COPING WITH CHANGE**  
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Recently I've had several clients who are dealing with major changes in their lives: losing a job, starting a new career, ending a long-term relationship, re-locating here from another part of the country. September is also when many students, and their parents, are facing the changes that come with starting a new school year - so this seems like an excellent time to review what I've learned about change and how to cope with it.

Change, like death and taxes, is unavoidable. Heraclitis, a Greek philosopher who lived 2,500 years ago, said it best: *"There is nothing permanent in the world except change."* You'd think by now we'd have accepted that fact! And yet, everyone seems to hate change. We try hard to avoid it, run and hide when we see it coming, and complain bitterly when it finds us anyway.

Change can be a major source of stress, because **all change involves loss**. This is true even when the change is a positive one, like marriage, a new baby, or a new home. Think about it: we always have to give up something in order to get something new.

We are creatures of habit, and change requires adjustments to our routines. Sometimes we put off making necessary changes, like those involving diet or exercise, because it just seems too hard to learn new habits. Change can be stressful because **it threatens our "comfort zone"**, and sometimes we may even perceive that it threatens our very existence.

When people feel threatened by change, or just don't know how to handle it, they may develop unhealthy ways of coping, like drinking or overeating, getting angry or depressed, or becoming a "workaholic". Sometimes they just refuse to change! None of these are effective solutions, but it is possible to learn to cope well with change.

An excellent book about change is *"Transitions"*, by William Bridges. He describes three characteristic stages of change: the ending, the new beginning, and in between, which he calls **"the neutral zone."** The neutral zone is like being in limbo, a time when you may feel unsettled, disoriented and confused. You've left the old routines behind, but haven't yet settled into new ones. It's an uncomfortable place to be, so it's tempting to rush through it or skip right over it, as some people do when they go from relationship to relationship with hardly a pause in between.

But as Bridges points out, **the neutral zone is where the lessons of life are learned**. It's a time when you have an opportunity to reflect, review, and consider where you've been and where you're headed next. It's a time to measure your progress in achieving your goals, and revise those goals if necessary. It's a time to try a different approach, explore options, or just catch your breath before jumping into the next phase of your life.

The neutral zone is also a good time to find someone you can talk to – a trusted friend, spiritual advisor, or a counselor - someone who can help you sort out your thoughts and feelings about the changes you're going through, and take an objective look at your situation.