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Understanding and Managing Change

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Understanding and Managing Change

This leaflet is designed to assist you in understanding some of the normal emotions that we feel when we are faced with change.

Change is a natural part of life and it enables us to gain new experience, skills and confidence. No doubt we can all recall times of change in our life, for example moving schools when we were young, developing new relationships, new jobs, the birth of a child, the loss of a loved one, a new hobby etc.

During times of change we are going into situations that are new to us, situations that we are likely to have little or no evidence of our ability to cope with. We can experience thoughts of threat, feelings of anxiety and sometimes a drive to want to escape. These are natural experiences of facing change and can vary in degrees because of our own past experiences of change and past learning. We call this **anxiety**. In addition to this, we are often leaving something/someone else behind as we move through change, this can also be distressing and lead us to experience feelings of **loss** and **sadness**.

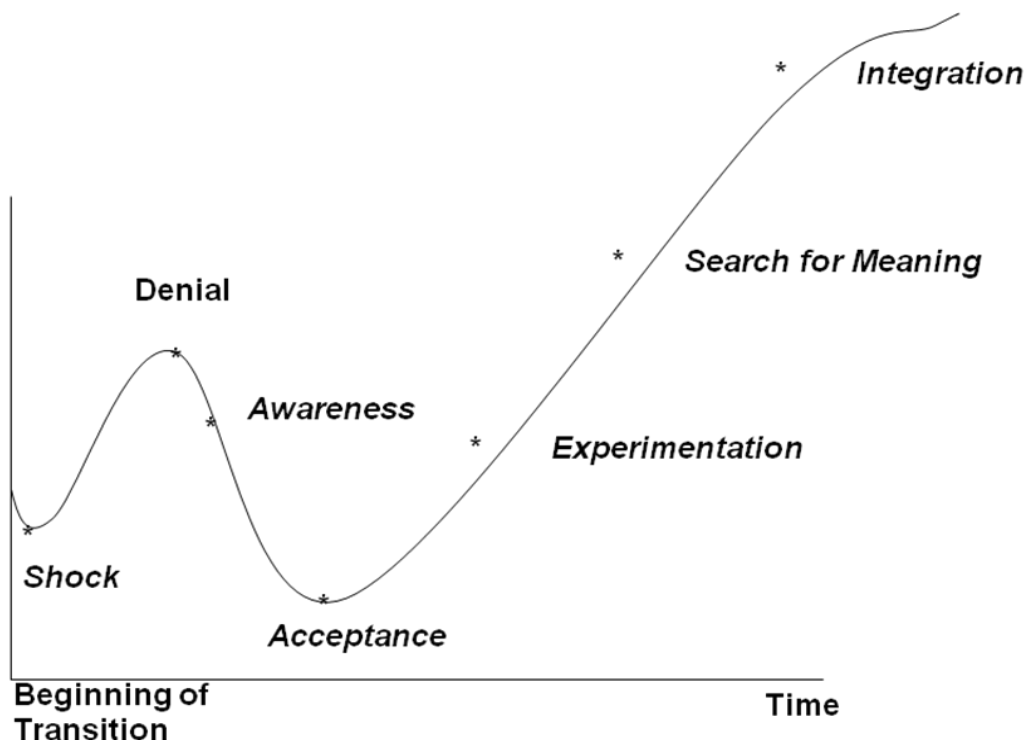
Often we engage in the change process through our own **choice** and feel we have **control** over that change (see example one below). This may only causes minimal anxiety as we feel in control and feel we can cope (otherwise why choose change!). However, when we feel change is thrust upon us, or against what we feel is right or just, then we can feel **"out of control"** and our perceived threat is activated, thus activating the anxiety response (see example two below). This is a challenging time for us and the treatment offered is about helping you to cope with this change and manage your anxiety. Often, although we do not feel we have **chosen** to go through change, we still have a responsibility to manage the change process.

Example One: The individual who chooses to move house to another area (perhaps for a larger property or better schools for their children). They have **chosen** to do this and feel in **control** of the process so anxiety may be minimal (all change has some anxiety).

Example Two: The individual whose partner leaves them or who loses their job through redundancy. They feel they have **not chosen** this path of change nor do they have any **control** but they recognise that they still have **responsibility** for change and although it is challenging, can engage in the change process with positive outcomes."

Understanding how you may feel when faced with changes in your life can help you to make sense of how you are feeling and can assist in managing the anxiety of change. The body will naturally process change over a period of time; the processing of change involves learning that you can cope with the situation that you have moved into, as well as being able to cope without what you have left. This process involves a series of stages of change and is called the 'transition process'. The graph below highlights this process.

The Transition Process



1. Shock

This is experienced at the stage of awareness of change and involves feelings of shock and surprise, or in extreme cases can cause panic and a feeling of immobilisation, related to the mismatch between expectations and reality.

E.g. “This can’t happen to me!”

2. Denial

This follows the shock phase and is a feeling of denial that change is necessary. This can involve a feeling of ease as it relates to an avoidance of facing change and so makes us feel better in the short term, giving us a feeling of false competence.

E.g. “I won’t do it and I don’t have to”

3. Awareness

Our awareness and understanding that change is necessary follows the denial phase and allows us to move into acceptance.

E.g. “It looks like this is going to happen then”

4. Acceptance

This enables us to face reality and move into letting go of what we had and moving into change.

E.g. “I suppose I will have to do it”

5. Experimentation

Once we have reached acceptance we can move into change and we begin to test out new approaches and skills that may assist us in our new situation and is a period of learning and experimentation. This is an important phase as it is where individuals physically begin to engage in the change process (behaviours). Previous phases are more about “thinking” than “doing” but without the latter the process of change can’t be completed.

E.g. “What will I need for this change?”

6. Search for meaning

During our experimentation and learning we create new ways of understanding, which help us adapt to our new environment. This is both about “thinking” and “doing” and it is where we begin to settle into change and emotions calm down.

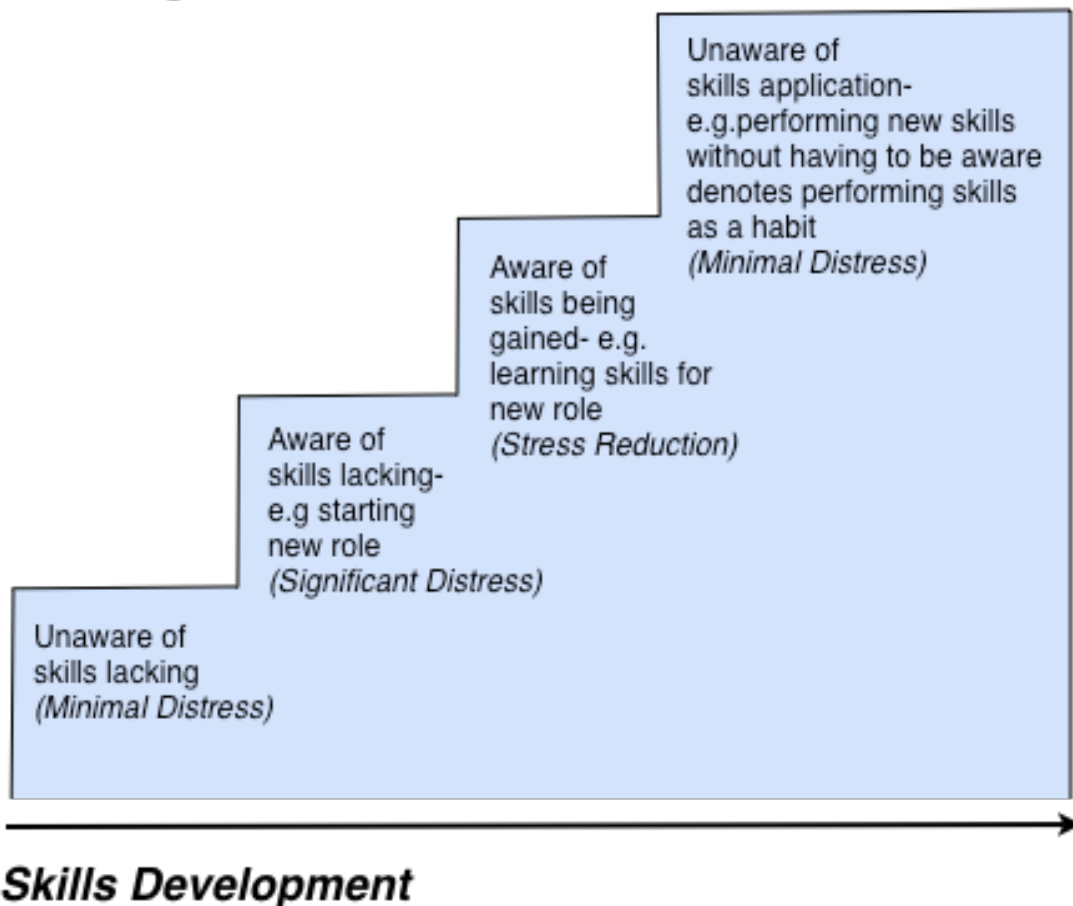
7. Integration

This final stage enables the integration of these new ways of understanding and behaviour into our normal daily routines and completes the transition through change.

Learning new skills

The diagram below displays how this process of change and gradual skill development can influence our levels of distress. You can see that during the initial phases there is an unawareness of the skills that we might be lacking and as such we are not aware of what we don't know so we experience minimal distress. However, as we become aware of the skills lacking, we are likely to experience significant distress, but as we work through change and develop new learning our distress begins to subside and we are aware of our developing skills. Finally, when skills are well learnt and rehearsed we move into doing things as 'habit' that feeling of doing things automatically.

Skills Development- Learning New



This overall processing is a natural part of dealing with change and as we have discussed can bring with it feelings of both anxiety and sadness. The boxes below highlight some of the natural symptoms that can accompany both of these emotions to help you make sense of any changes you may be experiencing whilst in the transition of change.

Recognising the Symptoms of Anxiety

Emotion

Anxiety

Irritability

Feeling keyed up

Feelings of wanting to escape

Behaviour

Avoidance of situations

Increased dependency

Restlessness/Jumpiness

Excessive alertness

Drinking

Thoughts

Worrying thoughts

Difficulty concentrating

Mind going blank

Over interpretation of threat

View of self as vulnerable

Low self-efficacy

Thoughts of escape

Biology

Fight or flight symptoms (for example: sweating, shaking, dizziness, palpitations, nausea, dry mouth)

Biology (Fight/Flight Response)

What Happens?	Why?	Side Effects?
Breathing Rate Increases	To pull in oxygen for energy for the muscles to enable you to fight/run	Short, shallow breathing
Heart Rate Increases	To pump the oxygenated blood around to the muscles	Heart pumping faster
Blood Flow Changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To gorge more blood in the blood vessels in the neck/ shoulders and back/legs to get ready for fight/flight To pull blood away from the extremities (e.g. hands and feet, to help survival as extremities are more vulnerable to loss and this can reduce blood loss) To bring blood into the trunk of the body to protect vital organs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tension in neck/shoulders. Headaches. Tension in legs and back Numb/cold extremities, tingling in them as blood returns
Digestion shuts down	To save energy for the survival mechanism	Dry mouth Difficulty swallowing Churning stomach
Impulse to remove weight and obstruction from body	To prevent choking by intense activity in case you have just eaten. To reduce weight to assist with running/fighting	Feeling sick Feeling like you need to go to the toilet
Shut Down Sleep Centre	To maintain alertness during danger	Unable to sleep Delayed onset of sleep Broken Sleep. Light/un-refreshing sleep
Move Brain activity to more primitive region	The priority in an immediate physical danger is speed. Our logic is slow and would put us in danger. The move to the more primitive area of the brain enables speedier although more rudimentary decisions	Poor concentration Poor memory Poor higher motor skills Poor reasoning and problem solving Difficulty with new learning
Restores Body Temperature Return of blood to extremities	To enable bodily functions within the body to function normally	Sweating, pins and needles, Tiredness (as a result of energy being produced but unable to be utilised as not needed now)

Recognising the Symptoms of Depression

Emotion

Sadness

Loss of interest and pleasure in work/hobbies/social activities

Desire to escape

Anxiety

Irritability

Anger

Behaviour

Inactivity

Reduced social contact

Pacing

Crying

Complaining

Avoidance of work/hobbies/social activities

Increased dependency

Drinking

Thoughts

Slow and muddled thinking

Pessimistic outlook

Self-blame

Indecisiveness

Low self-esteem

Biology

Loss of appetite/increased appetite

Loss of libido

Disturbed sleep (early morning wakening)

Retardation/agitation

Reduced energy levels

Reduction in pleasure

Sobbing

Reduced drive and motivation for tasks/interests

Reduced higher cognitive functioning (poor concentration, poor memory, difficulty learning new information)

Conclusion

It is important to realise that we always have choice and although we often feel change is foisted upon us, choice is often available. Some of the decisions may be very difficult to make, such as leaving a long term partner when we are not happy, or changing our jobs, but they are better options than avoiding the process of change as this can lead to chronic anxiety or/and depression.