

10 COPING STRATEGIES

When Your Life Is Turned
Upside Down And Dealing
With Major Changes

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Introduction To Major Changes

Major changes can create significant stress and chaos in our lives, even when those changes are considered positive. Major changes are those that involve a significant amount of preparation and work and have complex situations or major expenses (Aiello, 2013).

When faced with a major change, many people buckle under the stress and pressure and find themselves experiencing anxiety, stress, depression, and even physical and mental health issues.

In 1967 researchers Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe found a strong correlation between illness and the most stressful major changes and life events by assessing medical records of more than 5,000 patients.

In fact, the correlation was so strong that they were able to rank major changes on a scale from most to least stressful, originally published as the Social Readjustment Rating Scale, now known as the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale. In 1970, the reliability of this scale was tested by Rahe again.

He gave 2500 members of the U.S. military the scale and asked them to rate their most stressful life events. He then monitored the sailors for a period of 6 months and tracked their visits to the dispensary to see if there was a link between their reported life stress and visits to the doctor.

Again, the same positive correlation appears between reported major changes and illness as found in the original review of medical records (Pain Doctor, 2018).

The scale assigns each event a “Life Change Unit” score. These are then added together over a year and used to predict your risk of illness.



According to the Holmes and Rahe scale the most significant major changes and stressful events, as well as their Life Change Unit score, are as follows (Pain Doctor, 2020):

- Death of a spouse (or child*): 100
- Divorce: 73
- Marital separation: 65
- Imprisonment: 63
- Death of a close family member: 63
- Personal injury or illness: 53
- Marriage: 50
- Dismissal from work: 47
- Marital reconciliation: 45
- Retirement: 45

Some of the most common illnesses with links to stressful major life changes include:

- Chronic pain
- Obesity
- Gastrointestinal disorders such as the development of chronic heartburn, GER, or IBS
- Research has shown that the stress caused by major life changes can increase the chances of developing depression and anxiety by as much as 80%.
- Alzheimer's disease can also be linked to enhanced stress levels caused by major events. This is because stress causes the brain to form lesions more quickly which can accelerate the progression of the disease.
- Additionally, the stress associated with major changes can raise glucose levels of people with Type 2 diabetes (Pain Doctor, 2018).

Other examples of major life changes include pandemics, bankruptcy, the birth of a child, children leaving the nest, natural and man-made disasters, starting a business, and even menopause (Higher Awareness, 2020).

Given all this information, it's evident to see what can occur and manifest if one doesn't learn how to manage major changes in their lives. Developing this critical skill can go a long way to preserving peace and maintaining overall health and wellness.

10 Coping Strategies For Dealing With Major Changes

In order to be more productive and well-rounded people, we must learn to cope with major change as it is an unavoidable part of life. The following outlines 10 coping strategies to intentionally address dealing with a major change in a healthy and effective manner.

Assess The Situation

The first step in appropriately dealing with a major change should always be an acknowledgment and a thorough assessment of that situation. Taking the time to break down each facet of the situation and the corresponding emotions those facets may be leading to can help us identify possible problems that can be addressed, factors that we can dismiss, and other pertinent parts. It can also be useful to determine possible outcomes including worst and best-case scenarios.

Once the situation has been broken down into more manageable parts, we can better reason through it. We can then take the necessary measures to address the situation based on this assessment (Reach Out, 2020).

Accept The Situation

Much of the mental and emotional anguish we experience in relation to major changes comes from living in a state of denial or trying to fight the change itself.

Once we have taken the time to assess the situation, we can embrace it, and begin taking the necessary measures to actually address those things we have the power to influence and release those things outside of our control.



Resolving to accept what is outside the realm of our control frees us from the weight and burden of holding onto things that we cannot do anything about. Subsequently, it empowers us to use our energy and time to change those things we can (Sarkis, 2017).

Reframe

Reframing is the act of looking at a situation or a circumstance through a different lens. Major change often causes people to view things from a negative lens. The focus becomes the unexpectedness of the change, the inconvenience of the change, the challenges the change poses, or the stress the change causes within daily life.

Reframing would be the process of looking at the major change and intentionally seeking to see the change from a positive perspective.

This includes seeing potential opportunities the change presents, the benefits of the change, and the ways the change can enhance learning and knowledge among several others.



Get Support

Tackling any challenge alone can be daunting, and major changes can certainly be a challenge. Surrounding yourself with a community of people that can be both physical and emotional sources of support can be vital in maintaining wellness when going through a major change.

Support can look like providing a listening ear, offering coping strategies, or actually assisting with the processing of the change itself (i.e. offering to help with a big move). In any form, knowing that you are not alone as you deal with the major change can reduce stress and make the process easier for you.

Various types of groups you can turn to for support include:

- **Family:** Often, our families are composed of the people who know us the best and care about us the most. Within our families there tend to be individuals (parents, siblings, cousins) that we can turn to when we need someone to listen who will be there for us. The great thing family can typically offer is unconditional love, meaning that no matter what we share we know we will continue to be cared for.

Additionally, as most families want the best for their family members, families will often go out of their way to provide support and offer help however they can once that need has been expressed (Fader, 2017).

- **Friends:** Friends are another great outlet when we find ourselves dealing with a major change. Sometimes the things we may be dealing with might involve our families or we simply don't want to divulge our struggles with the people closest to us.

Friends, often being as close as a family member emotionally, but without a lot of the politics traditional families carry, can offer the support free from judgment, critique, and intruding feedback or intervention.

This can be great for those truly just seeking to get something off of their chest or simply just wanting comfort from someone they know cares about them (Fader, 2017).

- **Trained Professionals:** There are many instances where a trained and licensed professional is the best, safest, and healthiest option when it comes to getting support during times of major change. Certain situations and life experiences require a certain level of expertise so that they are managed with the proper level of care and action when necessary.

Counselors, therapists, and other trained professionals come armed with years of knowledge, professional experience, and an arsenal of resources and techniques to help

you talk through your thoughts and feelings, deeper explore those thoughts and feelings, and then help you attach greater meaning to those thoughts and feelings.

Additionally, they can aid in the development and implementation of coping strategies to help you get through the tough time (Fader, 2017).

Establish A Routine

A significant agitator when a major change takes place is the lack of control we feel over the situation. There are often a lot of moving parts that can make us feel out of place and unable to cope with what is occurring.

Defined, a routine is a sequence of actions regularly followed. Routines add value during major changes by acting as a type of grounding force to help us be more balanced (Finestone, 2020).

Routines can re-establish a sense of control and normalcy that can help us navigate major changes.

Knowing what to expect on a day to day or even an hourly basis can help establish a sense of calm and keep us grounded in the midst of major change.

Additionally, routines contribute to better sleep, less anxiety, more predictability, and better overall resilience.



Implement Stress Management Strategies

Though certain types of major change are unpredictable or unexpected, other types of major change can be prepared for.

Stress management strategies can be used to prevent and minimize the stress experienced during a major change.

The following activities can work to release tension, regulate emotions, bring about reason, and promote calm.

- Exercise
- Meditation
- Yoga
- Rest
- Tai Chi
- Moderate intensity exercise several times per week
- Healthy diet
- Time management
- Set limits and boundaries for self-care
- Engage hobbies
- Proper sleep
- Avoid alcohol and drugs
- Get support from friends and family
- Spend time with people having fun
- Relaxation
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Aromatherapy

Practice Self-Care

Self-care is the practice of doing those things that promote an overall sense of well-being and health. Self-care is unique to each individual person and what works for one person in one situation may not work for another person in the same situation.



For some, self-care consists of smaller actions and activities such as reading, taking walks, or listening to music. These act as forms of stress relief by taking your mind off the major change and redirecting attention towards something relaxing and likely to promote joy and peace in your life.

For others, self-care looks like spending time alone or going to therapy. These types of activities are more stringent methods of preserving peace, engaging in reflection, and processing thoughts and emotions.

Exercise

As simple as it might sound, getting regular exercise as part of self-care is a strong coping strategy for dealing with major changes. It can aid significantly in the management of stress, anxiety, and negative emotions that can accompany a major change.



When we exercise the body is filled with endorphins which enhance mood, increase relaxation, and decrease anxiety. There is also research to suggest that as the temperature of the body increases with exercise, the neural circuits responsible for controlling cognitive function and mood are altered, including those that impact the neurotransmitter serotonin.

Similarly, this response is believed to be linked to stress reduction, mood boosting, and enhanced relaxation. Just 20 minutes of exercise can produce these positive effects and help you cope with major change.

Relaxation and Rest

Being sure to get enough rest during periods of major change is another way to ensure you are adequately able to cope with that change. Failure to get adequate amounts of sleep



on a regular basis amplifies the brain's anticipatory reactions which in turn increases overall anxiety levels during periods of major change.

Essentially, we are more prone to react to situations with anxious responses when we are lacking sleep so ensuring we get rest regularly is essential to keeping anxiety levels low and stress well managed. Thus, getting enough sleep when we are going through major changes helps us to stay calm and rational so we can effectively navigate the change.

Set Boundaries

A boundary is a line we set to keep ourselves safe- this can be physically, mentally, or emotionally. Setting boundaries is another way to facilitate feelings of control during times that can generally be chaotic and unpredictable.

Setting boundaries can look like telling people “no” when asked to do things, turning down social invitations, staying off social media platforms, or implementing whatever other limits necessary to help keep you from getting stressed, anxious, and depressed. Essentially boundaries are about avoiding triggers that can cause you to become unstable during periods of major change.

Focus On The Facts

Focusing on the facts and not the fear-based and stress-based reactions is key. While the former brings on mass anxiety without any constructive action, fact-based awareness, intentions, and the subsequent actions taken can bring the balance needed to feel a sense of control.

When we are facing challenges, chaos or changes it is easy to get caught up in the emotional side of the fear, anger and anguish that can take place. Often these emotions are not rooted in fact but in panic based responses. This leads to catastrophic thinking, which can never support constructive and objective coping responses.

Break the cycle of catastrophic thinking by focusing on the facts.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a grounding practice. It creates balance when focus is so deeply set on things that are going wrong, such as the case when our life gets turned upside down, for whatever reason. There is comfort in gratitude. Gratitude is hope. Gratitude is a positive mindset.

Make a gratitude list and review it often. Express your gratitude to others, such as telling your family and friends how much you appreciate them. Sharing makes us feel better about ourselves and reveals just how much we have to be grateful for.

Conclusion

At some point we will all experience a major life change, whether negative or positive. Major change is an unavoidable part of life, so being aware of measures you can take to maintain calm and wellness amidst major change is key to continuing to thrive and be resilient.

By implementing one or a combination of the strategies listed above, you can take preventative measures for major changes you are aware are coming, as well as take quick action when unexpected major changes occur to mitigate the impacts. Such measures and others like it will help ensure the best possible outcome and overall wellness when major changes arise.

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