



HEALTHQUEST

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOCUSING ON
MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND CONCERNS.

WEATHERING TURBULENT TIMES

Sharon has been happy in the administrative assistant position she's held for the past ten years. But a few months ago her manager retired. Then, because of some re-organization within the company, Sharon was transferred to another department. These changes and the adjustments required of her have been stressful for Sharon.

In fact, she often yearns for "the good old days" when she enjoyed coming to work.

Leslie and Ross are a young, married couple whose combined salaries have allowed them to buy a condo and create a comfortable lifestyle for themselves. Leslie is expecting their first child in a few months. Her wish is to quit work and stay home with their child for at least two years. It is not surprising that Ross and Leslie are concerned about how they are going to manage on one salary.

Bill is employed in the accounting department of a large organization. Like many Canadians he finds himself handling a much heavier workload in the '90s. In fact, Bill and his two co-workers are doing work that used to be handled by five people. Bill is the type of person who keeps his worries to himself. Lately, he's been having trouble sleeping and feels depressed. In other words, Bill is showing signs of stress.

Although we may not have to cope with the same personal transitions as those in the scenarios above, many of us are facing a stream of unprecedented changes. In addition to personal change, there are global, technological, economic, and social shifts that are causing sweeping changes in our lives. All things considered, it's understandable that most of us feel we are living in turbulent times. In fact, a recent survey revealed that 72 per cent of employees feel stress caused by uncertainty about the future.

Listen to what behavioural researcher and author Shad Helmstetter says about change: "There is a direct relationship between changes in our lives and the level of stress we experience. Change causes stress. When our security is threatened, or when we don't know what's coming next, we respond by feeling anxious or by worrying. This anxiety is what causes stress."

THE PHASES OF CHANGE

The experts tell us that adjustment to a major change takes time. In fact, there is a number of phases we go through when adapting to change. The first phase is denial.

For instance, Sharon, the secretary in the first scenario, likely felt shock and disbelief when she first heard about the transfer. Sharon probably found herself thinking, "This can't be happening to me." Bear in mind that this denial stage actually prevents us from being overwhelmed by change.

In the second phase, Sharon likely resisted the change. What's more, she probably experienced feelings such as anger and fear. Often, the flood of emotions we experience during changes are less frightening when we realize they are shared by others. What's important, though, is that we acknowledge these emotions. The sooner we do this, the sooner we are able to move on to the next phase.

Sharon will know she is in the third phase, when she begins to let go of the past and looks toward the future. Finally, Sharon will accept the change and adapt to her new job with renewed energy.

These phases are predictable. However, the duration of each can vary from person to person because adapting to change is an individual process. It's important to realize there is an element of loss in change. What we are actually acknowledging and dealing with is loss. In other words, we are saying goodbye to the familiar.

HOW CAN YOU HELP YOURSELF TO DEAL WITH CHANGE?

Here are nine suggestions you might consider:

- ▲ **LEARN ABOUT CHANGE.** We have provided you with some basic facts; however, you may find it helpful to read some books on the subject. Here are two you'll find well worth reading:
 - ▲ **Managing Personal Change:**
Self-Management Skills for Work and Life Transitions
by Scott and Jaffe.
 - ▲ **You Can Excel in Times of Change**
by Helmstetter.

- ▲ **MAINTAIN A POSITIVE ATTITUDE.** If you find yourself saying negative things to yourself such as "I can't change" or "Things are just going to get worse" or "That's my luck," you may find the following techniques helpful:

This one is called the "stop technique." Every time you find yourself dwelling on the negative, imagine a big, red stop sign in front of you. This signals to you that it's time to switch to more positive thoughts.

The "balance-sheet technique" is helpful to people who are focusing on the negative aspects of a situation. For instance, Sharon and Bill in our scenarios, could write down a positive point to offset each complaint they have about their jobs.

Visualization is a technique that can be used to handle stress. All of us have at least one place in the world that we have found to be particularly peaceful and relaxing. It may be your own backyard or it may be a far-away island that you have visited while on vacation. Just taking a minute or two to visualize yourself enjoying this ideal place can restore your peace of mind.

- ▲ **VENT YOUR FEELINGS.** As you go through a change, it's important to turn to others for emotional support. You may find that talking with someone who is a good listener can help to reduce your anxiety. Bear in mind, however, that the listener should be someone who will counteract your negative feelings, rather than reinforce them. If the change is work related, discuss it with a friend outside of the workplace, instead of with a co-worker. Similarly, those closest to you may not be able to give you the support you need if they are also affected by the change. This means that you may want to talk it out with an understanding friend or perhaps with a professional such as your EAP counsellor.
- ▲ **PRACTICE STRESS MANAGEMENT.** In times of change some people resort to overeating or overuse of alcohol or prescription drugs in an effort to control stress. The truth is that these negative strategies accomplish nothing and can actually harm us. The best way to cope with stress is to find some skill, activity or technique that will help you to relax. Examples are: aerobic exercise, walking, listening to music, gardening. What works for one person may not work for another. The idea is to discover what works for you and then make it part of your daily routine.
- ▲ **LOOK AFTER YOURSELF.** During times of change, we often spend so much time worrying that we tend to neglect ourselves. Remember that change requires energy. Proper nutrition, adequate rest and regular exercise will help provide the energy you need to be resilient in times of change.
- ▲ **MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS.** Spending regular time with family or friends can help recharge your batteries, in his book, *The Joy of Stress*, Peter G. Hanson, M.D., points out that people who relegate family and friends to the back seat in their lives gravely weaken stress resistance. He goes on to say, "It is important that due emphasis be placed on the safety net of family, friends--and even pets if you wish. They provide much-needed support."
- ▲ **TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR FINANCES.** First, cutback on spending. Although most of us know how much our major fixed costs are,

we often don't know how much we spend on items such as clothing, gifts, entertainment and restaurant meals. By keeping track of how much you spend each day for one month, you can learn where to cutback. Second, pay off credit cards each month to avoid high interest rates. Third, decide what per cent of your take-home pay you can save each month. Then, write out a cheque to deposit in your savings account.

- ▲ **FIND WAYS TO HANDLE A HEAVIER WORKLOAD.** It's not unusual to hear people say that too much to do, with too little time to do it, is their greatest cause of stress. An important question for each of us to ask is: "Am I making the best use of my time?" Discuss time management with your co-workers, especially with those who are well organized and efficient. Peter may know some "WordPerfect" shortcuts, and Bill may have a streamlined method of writing memos that you can put into practice. Read books and articles on time management and adapt the ideas to your use.
- ▲ **TRY TO VIEW CHANGE AS AN OPPORTUNITY.** It's important to realize that it is our evaluation of a situation, not the situation itself, that causes stress. For instance, Sharon can choose to view her new job as an opportunity to work with different people, to increase her knowledge of the organization's operations and to learn new skills. Ross and Leslie can learn to manage their money and grasp this opportunity to have the type of family life they both want. Bill can continue to let his increased workload overwhelm him, or he can see it as an opportunity to become a more efficient and productive employee, while at the same time retaining gainful employment.

Above all else, the ability to weather turbulent times involves an awareness that we do have some control over the changes in our lives.

If you have any questions about this topic, or if you wish to discuss a personal situation you may be experiencing, we invite you to contact your EAP counsellors to arrange a telephone or in-person counselling session.

All contact between you and your counsellor is completely confidential.

English Service: 1-800-387-4765
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