



Mentally Preparing for Life's Transitions

AKA: The Psychology of Transition

Presented by:
Candace Hoffman
Field Coordinator
NC Lawyer Assistance Program

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1



It has become cliché

“The only thing constant in life is change.”

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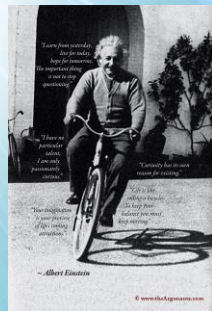
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A Smart Guy Said It

“Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.”

~ Albert Einstein,
letter to his son Eduard, 1930



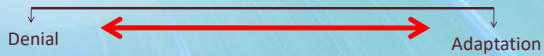
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3



Self Preservation Instincts

- Denial vs. Adaptation
- A balancing act. We use a lot of energy for both, and sometimes we use more energy to stay on one side of the continuum.
- Common belief: “we resist change”



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4



Definition of Change:

- to make the form, nature, content, future course, etc., of (something) different from what it is (or from what it would be if left alone)
- to transform or convert

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5



Transition on the other hand...

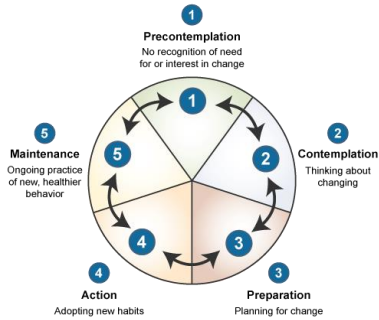
- Letting go of that piece of ourselves that we have to give up when and because the situation has changed.
- William Bridges – The Way of Transition
- This is actually what we resist because it is so deeply significant and personal.

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Psychological Stages of Change



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Stage 1 – Precontemplation

- “Not ready” or avoidance - The change is not on the person’s radar screen yet.
 - Not speaking circumstantially here, we’re speaking psychologically
- If approached about a possible change, the person will typically (unconsciously) underestimate the pros and overestimate the cons with little to no actual information

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8



Stage 2 – Contemplation

- “Getting Ready” or overcoming ambivalence
- On the radar screen, starting to gather information
- Pros and cons are about equal as they are weighed
- Ambivalence can lead to long delays of months or years before taking action

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9



Stage 3 - Preparation

- “Ready”
- Begin with small steps
- Support from friends, family and colleagues is key
- Biggest concerns are usually if they take this action, will there be the payoff expected? Will it work out as hoped? What will happen?

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10



Stage 4 - Action

- “All in”
- Change is made, new behavior underway
- This can be a very motivated time, new experiences, new ways of reacting or interacting...often excitement of a new chapter

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11



Stage 5 - Maintenance

- “New Way of Life”
- Change is well established
- Old ways seem distant
- One may even question, “Why did it take me so long to come to this decision (action) (change)?”

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12



If only it were that simple...

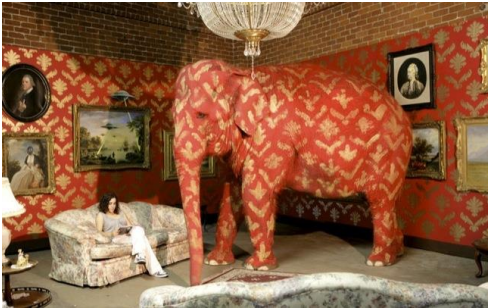
- There are several compounding factors that influence a person's readiness to change and to progress through the 5 stages of change.
- These factors are the three largest factors for our talk today and yet remain mostly, if not completely, unacknowledged

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13



ELEPHANT in the Room #1



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14



Ego (False Self)

- Psychological vice that masquerades as virtue for many professionals: the unmitigated identification of self with occupation, accomplishment and professional satisfaction. - WSJ
- One of the biggest fears for holders of respected positions is the potential loss of public esteem.

So WHY is it so difficult to let that go?....

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15



Adding to that Egoic False Self

- Legal profession adds new layers and dimensions – we are largely unaware of
 - Zealous advocacy;
 - Always the helper;
 - Confidentiality;
 - Isolated; Workload
 - Tomorrow never comes; prioritizing false self goals over true interests that do not serve a professional or reputational purpose
 - Success

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16



ELEPHANT in the Room #2



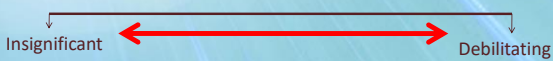
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17



Anxiety

- Venture into the unknown = uncertainty
- Instinctual drive to stay safe, self preserving – moving past those boundaries, by definition, creates anxiety
- Therefore, all change, big or small, is also accompanied by some form of anxiety
 - Might be insignificant or debilitating, but it is there



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18



Anxiety continued...

- Behaviors include:
 - Overthinking - identifying and planning for every possible contingency (A, B, C, and D) (then A1/A2, B1/B2, etc)
 - We invariably miss something anyway
 - Difficult to “trust the unfolding process”
 - Believe it is “all up to me” to create a result
 - Quite sure “other shoe will drop”
 - Catastrophising - forgetting to look back and see things that have worked out in the past
 - Lots of self-doubt and second guessing

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Can look like good lawyering!

19



Common Example

- Staying in an unsatisfying job (practice area or practice setting) due to security fears (“Devil you know...”)
 - “Fear” of financial insecurity vs financially secure reality (leaving big firm example)
- Missed opportunities (not work related)

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20



ELEPHANT in the Room #3



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21



Grief



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22



5 Stages of Grief

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

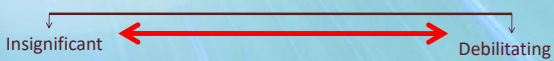
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23



Let's talk about grief

- All change, no matter how big or small, whether we label it "good" or "bad" is accompanied by some form of grief
 - Might be insignificant or debilitating, but it is there



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24



Grief continued...Stories

- Vacuum/Pint Glass?
- Mothers Day
- Switching practices
- The Veterinarian's Observation

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25



Resources

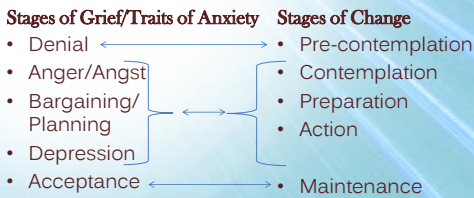
- Cultural mores about any form of grief today (excerpt from Joan Didion's book)
- The Grief Club by Melody Beattie
- The Way of Transition by William Bridges (one of many books)

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26



Notice any correlations?



Not always an exact correlation, but you can see the similarities and convergences of processes – how grief or anxiety can influence moving through stages of change.

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27

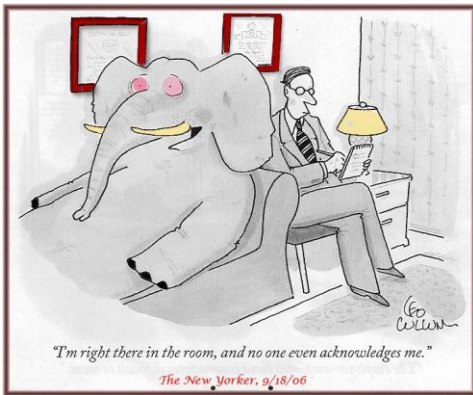


Now put it all together:

- Unconscious over identification with job
- Anxiety that comes with change
- Unspoken, unrecognized grief that comes with change
 - That we're culturally not allowed to recognize or speak of
- All reinforcing denial stage (pre-contemplation)

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No Wonder...

- It is no wonder phasing out of law practice can be so difficult for us.
- Now that we know some of what is at play, what are some practical steps we can take to prepare?

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30



Begin Simple Self-Reflection

- Look back on your own life.
 - Jot down 5 major changes or transitions you have been through in your life personally. Some common examples:
 - Going to undergrad or law school
 - Getting married or divorced
 - Having children (each child counts as an event)
 - Starting a job, leaving a job, switching practices
 - Moving to a new city

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31



What can you identify?

Stages of Grief

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

Stages of Change

- Precontemplation
- Contemplation
- Preparation
- Action
- Maintenance

Fears/Anxieties

- Overplanning
- Dreading
- Trying to control process or participants
- Being stuck due to uncertainty about change

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32



Predictor

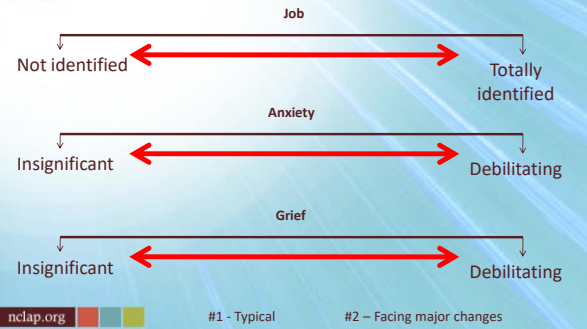
- We tend to be creatures of habit and conditioned emotional response
- We usually have a standard repertoire of emotional responses
 - Knowing how we dealt with something in the past will help us anticipate it in the future so that we can prepare adaptive strategies
- Looking at big picture trends that stand out

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33



Assess Yourself



34



Looking Ahead - Proven Strategies

- When dealing with the emotional and psychological transition of retirement, identify for yourself:
 - Where do you currently overly identify with your job/role?
- Strategy for dis-identifying – true example
- Analogous “work” – i.e., serving on boards (two recent LAP Foundation presidents) (Projects of passion, Rotary, tutoring, taxes, mentoring) that still gives us the ego-perks



35



Looking Ahead - Proven Strategies

- When dealing with the emotional and psychological transition of retirement, identify for yourself:
 - What outside interests have you maintained?
 - What outside interests can you start fostering now?



36



What's On Your Plate?



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37



"Would you like to hear about our retirement plan?"

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38



"When we retire, I want to watch travel videos."

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39



If you need to reach us

Cathy Killian
Clinical Director/West
704-910-2310
cathy@nclap.org

Robynn Moraites
Executive Director
704-503-9695
robynn@nclap.org

Nicole Ellington
Eastern Area
919-719-9267
nicole@nclap.org

Candace Hoffman
Field Coordinator
919-719-9290
candace@nclap.org

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Thank you!
