



## Navigating Life's Transitions

What do you think of in relation to your own life's transitions? Have they been difficult? Relatively easy? A combination?

Some transitions are short in duration; others seem to encompass a lifetime. Some we navigate with the help of others (e.g., like a child learns to stand and walk). Others, even though we may have support of family and friends, we traverse alone (e.g., entering puberty, pregnancy or infertility, aging).

Some transitions are traumatic, like living through a war zone or being sexually assaulted as a child or adolescent or being suddenly diagnosed with a terminal or disabling illness. Others flow naturally, like moving through grades at school or entering retirement years. Some, like immigration, require immense changes, perhaps learning a new language and adjusting to a whole new culture. Some transitions are visible, others invisible. Some, like reentering the workforce after years at home raising children, or changing jobs, may draw us into new communities.

But one thing is certain in our lives: change and transition mark our passages throughout the life cycle, just as seasons change through winter to spring to summer and autumn. Our challenge is to embrace the changes and transitions and, however painful, to work through them to grow into all we are able to be and to become.

Change frequently involves chaos, the abyss of not knowing, an emptiness — and includes grief and fear. But change also (thankfully) involves release, a new way of experiencing ourselves and the world. Change may be chosen freely from within or imposed — sometimes against our will — from without.

What makes transformation possible in the midst of chaos and change? I would suggest that **faith** allows us to proceed as if there is potential for new possibilities.

A transition can be a threshold: a standing on the doorstep to something new, which is to begin. But new beginnings are hard to perceive. Often therapists see clients at a place of pain and chaos, where they face the choice to either be destroyed or to allow the process of change to reveal to them a new order for things.

Think of a life transition you chose, and one you did not choose:

- How did it change you?
- How did you take care of yourself in the midst of it?
- Is there a wound that has not been healed?

In the midst of life transitions, many learn that God's grace sustains them even in the depths of the pain of rejection and abandonment by those they loved and thought they could trust.

Women and men are living today in a period of intense social change and transition. Questions about the structure of justice and gender relations are being examined in all areas of life, challenging us to explore what justice means for relationships between men and women: justice in family, faith communities, society, the law, and the economy.

From my own perspective as a therapist, I see people struggling to have a sense of self-esteem while dealing with the reality that — to a great extent — neither society nor family are always “safe places” or supportive of change. For example, Health Canada has published several studies that document that women work longer days, have fewer leisure hours, do a second shift at home when working outside the home, and earn less than men. This often leads to depression, which robs one of a capacity for joy.

Pornography and cyber sex are multi-billion dollar businesses in North America and are increasingly implicated in sexual abuse of children and rape of girls and women. It also causes huge rifts in relationships and destroys trust. Domestic violence is shown to intensify at times of high unemployment. After divorce, women and children’s economic welfare often drastically decreases, while men’s increases. A high percentage of child support and maintenance orders continue to be in default, in spite of laws making these mandatory in Canada.

Many therapeutic issues are grounded in these public justice issues and are reflected in low self-esteem and shame, becoming especially evident during times of transition. Shame at feeling powerless to effect change. Shame at being victims of assault or sexual abuse. Shame at being abandoned. Shame at feeling unworthy. This shame may lead to burnout and physical and mental health-related illnesses.

Healing of self, of relationships, of society cannot be done alone. We need human community.

We are created as relational beings. We all need to feel a sense of belonging and support and affection from others. We know that children learn trust as they experience emotional safety, and this basic foundational attachment need is true throughout our lives. Ultimately, self-esteem comes from within, a developing resilience and strength giving us an inner sense of continuity and groundedness even when external situations change.

While transitions foster growth and need not be feared but rather embraced on the journey of life, they are a spiritual reality more possible in the context of healthy supportive relationships.

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