

LIFE CHANGES
A GUIDE
TO THE
SEVEN STAGES
OF PERSONAL
GROWTH

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PARAVIEW
Special Editions
NEW YORK

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LIFE CHANGES

Have you ever found yourself wandering in a daze as if you'd been hit on the head with a two-by-four? Have you awakened in the morning wondering if you'll ever be "normal" again?

Do you remember days when you went to work feeling as if you didn't want to be there, being bothered by the silliest little things for no apparent reason? Maybe you've even found yourself questioning whether life was really worth living?

Did you ever lie in bed at night unable to sleep, watching the patterns on the ceiling and wondering if you were going crazy — so confused about what you *really* wanted from your life, your job, your relationships that you didn't know if you were coming or going?

If you answered "yes" to any of these questions you've probably experienced the trials and triumphs that come with life's major changes. We intend this book to be a helpful guide or roadmap for you and for others who travel through these very natural — yet often bumpy — times in life.

Why We Wrote The Book

Wherever we go these days, we run into people talking about divorce, loss of a job, a new marriage, the death of a loved one, a relocation, retirement, or others of life's many changes. It seems that just about everybody is either just beginning a change, right in the middle of one, or just finishing one, and wondering how long it will be before they have to start all over again.

For most of us, change is not something that happens now and again. It seems to have become "a way of life." Just as we think things are "back to normal," we come face to face with the next change. Stability seems to be a thing of the past, something we only get to dream about.

By examining our own experiences and those of many hundreds of our workshop participants, we've found a predictable and quite natural sequence of adjustment that people go through when they make any kind of change. When people find that their experience is normal, they become less afraid and more aware of the learning that comes from the ups and downs of the transition process.

Today people want to make the most of the changes they face, whether they're changes they've chosen or ones that come out of the blue. There is willingness to prepare for the consequences that follow a major change, rather than leaving it all to chance. Still, no matter how much preparation you do, you can't always avoid the "emotional hiccupping" that comes with life's bigger changes. This book is designed to help you come to terms with this part of the change, and to enhance your experience of transition with more growth and less pain.

Interestingly, we have found that even if the change is positive or chosen — such as getting married or taking a new job — you are as likely to experience the same seven stages of transition as when negative change has been imposed on you by someone else — such as being left by a spouse or being fired.

This means that even such positive changes as having a baby, finding your “soul-mate,” or moving to a desirable part of the country may trigger intense feelings and thoughts that come as a complete surprise.

It is often harder to understand the downside of wanted changes, because you’re expecting that everything’s going to be “wonderful” and you’ll live happily ever after. For example, getting married might be great, but you’ll probably have to go through the process of “divorcing your singleness” — and that can be upsetting.

How much the transition “hurts” depends a lot on how much you are taken by surprise or shocked by the change. It is often the novelty of a situation that deepens the experience. There are other factors that influence how intensely you are aware of the transition stage; we’ll talk about them in Chapter Three.

In the past, change has been seen more as an “event” and not as a “process.” Once the event has happened, people are expected to get on with their lives as quickly as possible and get back to “normal.” Reality, however, is very different. Whatever the change is, in order to have something new in our lives we have to let go of “the way things used to be” — and that takes time.

It sounds simple but few of us have been taught how to cope with the emotional confusion that comes with grieving the old situation while preparing to face the new one. It’s this process of adjusting to an important life change that we’ll be taking you through.

Whether the change is one you have chosen or one you wish would go away, the transition forces you to leave the known and step into the new and unknown territory. William Bridges (1980) describes these phases as endings, neutral zone, and beginnings.

Whether you are thinking about making a change or are slap-bang in the middle of one, we want this book to become

your valuable companion. It is designed to help you understand what is happening as you journey on "the roller coaster," and it will guide you to some of the opportunities to become wiser — before you get too much older!

Is This Book For You?

If you or someone close to you face any of the changes listed below, then this book is sure to be of help.

- divorce or separation, the end of an important relationship
- new intimate relationship
- death of someone close, a family member, or a friend
- major illness or accident — your own or that of someone close to you
- move to a new residence
- marriage
- birth of a child
- children leaving home or coming back again
- breaking an addiction
- retirement, your own or your life-partner's
- change of career field
- job change, either upward, downward or sideways
- change in boss, company structure, merger or acquisition
- starting or completing school
- starting a new business
- major success — your own or that of someone close to you

Even if you are not going through any of these changes right now, we think the book will help you understand the trials everyone experiences from time to time.

Although transitions usually are seen as resulting from a major change, each of us tends to go through the seven stage cycle (described in Chapter Two) even with everyday experiences. Since these situations usually involve little novelty or surprise, one is less likely to be aware of anything out of

the ordinary. When a big change occurs, however, the ups and downs can become quite intense.

What's The Book All About?

If you read through these pages and complete the exercises, we're sure you'll have a much better idea of how you can best help yourself weather the changes that are a big part of everyone's life experience. Also, as you find out that what you are going through is perfectly natural and very predictable, it probably will be less frightening for you to handle as you face the highs and the lows of "the change." Knowing that others have been through similar struggles can make it much easier to get through your own.

The seven-stage change sequence introduced in the next chapter (and covered in great detail throughout the book) gives you lots of information about what you can expect. Look at it as a map of the territory you will be crossing, with descriptions of what you are likely to find during your trip and some of the things you need to do to make sure you don't get lost. We'll even tell you how best to avoid getting stuck in "the swamps and the mires" that are often the most uncomfortable parts of the journey.

Like everyone else, of course, you'll make this journey in your own way. Some folks take the "highway," while others go via the "scenic route." You can actually turn the whole experience into quite a rewarding adventure if you are prepared. Our wish is that this book will give you many of the things you'll need to keep you safe as you move from the comfort of the known into the fear and excitement of the unknown.

We also want to help you discover some of your own special qualities so you can use them to help yourself through the "darker days" of a major transition. By working on the exercises throughout the book, you will feel a greater sense of

self-esteem and recognize the many strengths you already have.

The book is divided into three parts: *Part One* describes "The Nature of Personal Transition," what it is and what can help you get through it. We'll talk about the common characteristics of any transition and give you a framework of the ideas we develop throughout the book. There's an overview of the normal, seven-stage sequence of adjustment that occurs when people make major changes, and a description of the many factors that can make a transition either more or less intense.

In *Part Two* we take you on a detailed journey through "The Seven Stages of Transition," complete with case examples and discussions of why each stage happens, what it's like, where you'll find support, and how to move on.

In *Part Three*, there is a lot of information on how to "Make the Most of It All." You'll find specific skills which will help you at times of transition, an exploration of how beliefs affect your experiences of change, ideas about how to keep a positive attitude in the midst of all the chaos, and ways to stay healthy during these often stressful times.

Toward the end of the book, we'll explore the value of a clear sense of life purpose, and how you can sometimes get out of balance and sick when you don't have one. The last chapter gives you ten steps that can help you not just *go* through life changes, but *grow* from them.

In the Appendix, there is a list of suggested readings many have found helpful. Some people who ordinarily don't read very much often gain enormous comfort from others' accounts of transition experiences, and become "book worms" during periods of personal change. These books provide a source of knowledge and comfort and describe some very exciting life experiences.

The menu ideas offer a guide for healthy eating during times of change (or at any other time). Our guidelines for a balanced diet prove that it really isn't too difficult.

How Best To Use The Book

There are many ways you can get the most out of this book and your own experiences of transition. One is to have a notebook or journal with you as you read through the pages, completing the exercises in each chapter as you go along.

Another way is to read the text and forget the exercises. It will take just an hour or two, and you will still get a good idea about the process of transition and what may happen to you as you go through a significant life change.

A third possibility: after you've figured out which of the seven stages you are in, turn to the chapter that covers that stage in detail and work through what you need to do in order to move on.

Whichever way you choose, we hope that you will find the stories, text, and exercises to be useful as you help yourself and others make the very most out of life's changes.

We hope you'll enjoy this book and that it will help you with your own life journey. By the time you've read it through, we think you'll feel that it was all worthwhile, and we're confident you'll face your world with a renewed sense of optimism.