

Balancing Act: The Art of Coping With Change

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Whoever said that "nothing is constant except change" was right on target. We cannot live very well unless we learn to accept that change will often show up on our doorstep unannounced. During the last several years, change has not only appeared at the doorstep but also barged right in and made itself at home in many arenas of the medical practice. Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind during times of change and transition:

Keep Perspective

In the midst of a major change, it may appear that your whole life is out of control and there is nothing to anchor it. However, it is usually our reaction to change that narrows our focus and blinds us to the things that remain constant in our lives. The majority of transitions are not as major as we perceive them. Over time, you may not even remember them. To gain better perspective, ask yourself how important an issue will be in a year. As you gain more experience, you will realize that some of the changes you thought were so difficult have become the things for which you are most thankful.

Seek Support

Talk with others outside your field. Friends, clergy or counselors can help us see the larger picture. Attempting to adjust to change without support is like attempting to row a boat with one oar. It keeps us circling around change rather than moving forward to incorporate the change into our lives in a positive manner.

Review Your Assumptions

We may be forced to adjust or even let go of certain assumptions or beliefs as we review some of the stressful changes in our lives. If we lose a job, does that shake or shatter our belief about our calling to medicine or our philosophy of medical practice? When we find ourselves in a relationship conflict or dissolution, does it shatter our belief about trusting others? If a patient files a lawsuit against us, does it shatter certain beliefs about patient care or the way we practice? Some assumptions or beliefs outlive their usefulness and, if we do not review them, become destructive.

Don't Overcontrol

When life feels unstable, the easiest reaction is to hold on too tightly to our past experiences. We lock into our comfort zone, grit our teeth and suffer the status quo at any cost. But this will often result in losing even more control. I see this when I counsel couples and one partner is pulling away from the relationship while the other partner is caught reeling from this change. The temptation is for that person to hold onto or pursue the distancing partner more intensely, which usually results in even more distancing. Overcontrolling or overfunctioning to stop change doesn't work, at least not in the long run. Sort out what you can and cannot control and proceed accordingly.

Incorporate Flexibility

Change often involves negotiation, compromise and dialogue. If we refuse to budge, we become like a stiff tree that could snap in the wind. If we are willing to be flexible, we become more like a tree capable of bending and enduring the tests of the wind. Rigidity can cause us to resist even the positive changes in our personal and professional worlds, but flexibility enables us to grow from these challenges.

Transcend Your Circumstances

We can transcend our immediate circumstances by going deep within our psyche to tap a reservoir of strength or by seeking support from a power outside ourselves. Spirituality is not escapism, but rather the discovery of additional resources that provide strength for us in times of difficult transitions.

Expect the Unexpected

Change is a fact of life that needs not be seen as a necessary evil. It may move us toward growth and wholeness. If we embrace certain changes rather than fight them, and if we incorporate the suggestions above, we can make life and its transitions less cumbersome and disruptive. Be prepared. Change may be walking up the sidewalk at this very moment.

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