

Dealing With Change

by Jim Kendall, LCSW

It is natural for organisms in nature to gravitate toward homeostasis or equilibrium. Change, whether positive or negative, requires us to adapt, adopt, alter or accept. Change is inevitable. In a healthcare environment, change represents responses to changes in the marketplace, to economic pressures and to external forces. It is not a choice. It is necessary for survival.

In the 1971 work of stress management researchers Holmes and Rahe, change (as a life stressor) was identified as a major contributor to physical illness. Stress is not an external force that is done to us. It is our response to a given stressor (a person, situation or circumstance). It is neither good nor bad in itself. Our bodies (and minds) are like a fine stringed instrument: Too much stress on the strings and they snap, too little stress and all you hear is a thud. It is the right amount of stress that allows us to be our most productive and to make the instrument play its best musical tones.

Overall there are several categories of stressors that can cause us mental stress:

Unique Stresses: Those that require adaptations whether it is positive (eu-stress) or negative (dis-stress). Moving, marriage, a new job, the birth of a child, divorce, or other changes is stressful. Illness, loss of a job, or relationship problems stimulates our biochemical reactions.

Developmental Stresses: Learning new things and personal growth is positive; yet, serves as a stressor. Threats to our values, beliefs, our well being, or personal and financial security evoke a stress response. Unrealized expectations cause us to feel tense, anxious, and pressured.

Daily Routine Stresses: Our lives are filled with deadlines, expectations and the daily stresses of just getting up and getting to work. Parenting, family obligations and maintaining our daily life routine provides regular stressors as well.

Change can represent opportunity. It can stimulate us to consider different ways of dealing with our challenges. While few of us embrace the existence of managed care, it has resulted in some innovations and services that were not part of the healthcare system prior to its inception. To be fair, these changes have resulted in some more cost-effective methods for treatment with equal outcomes that were not considered prior to the created necessity. They have also resulted in some deterioration in other areas. A feeling of loss of control makes us feel helpless and vulnerable.

Learning to approach change as an exhilarating and invigorating experience requires us to adopt a different attitude. Although facing the unknown can precipitate anxiety and fear, we need to recognize change as the "passage from potentiality to actuality" (Aristotle). It

is normal to grieve for the old ways and to miss the familiar. As with many things in life, new adventures may yield even better possibilities.

The stress management techniques that help us deal with change have to do with adjusting our attitudes to be willing to consider change as a potential for growth. If not to embrace the change itself, at least to not oppose it. The process of change can be one of adventure for those who can handle the uncertainty that goes with it. If the stress becomes too great, the Vanderbilt Work/Life Connections-EAP can help as a first step for faculty and staff. Call (615) 936-1327.