

RELATIONSHIPS: TRANSITIONS



Even happy transitions can be challenging

By **NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG**

Correspondent

Why do happy transitions — even ones we elect — upset us?

A woman is thrilled to be selected as college president of a major institution, but wonders why she feels depressed after starting the job. A newly married couple moves into their first home, but following the excitement of hanging pictures and showing it off to family and friends, feels let down.

My story is a case in point. It was our choice to move. My husband was able to transfer to Washington, D.C., and I had a terrific job lined up. We had each other, small children and a close friend who

lived in the area. The transition should have been a piece of cake. However, I felt unsettled — actually unhappy. How could that be since this was a transition we initiated — we wanted. We had all our ducks in a row. Or so we thought.

That experience prompted some questions that have resulted in 30 years of studying transitions.

My questions:

What are the factors that make for a successful transition?

Why do we handle one transition with grace and others with confusion?

With the help of a researcher, I began studying ordinary transitions like geographical moving. I compared couples in the armed services with civilian couples.



Nancy Schlossberg

That pilot study led to many more transition studies: men whose jobs were eliminated at NASA Space Flight Center in Goddard, Md., clerical workers trying to balance work and family, adults returning to school, retirement, non-event transitions (transitions we expected that never occurred) and college presidents leaving the presidency.

In the three decades I have spent studying transitions, I have learned some things I'd like to share.

■ First, there is the expectation that the new home, the new car, the new baby, the new job will make us content and

joyful. Often, the reality is not quite what we imagined or hoped for. It's about expectations. That is why those couples in the armed services did better than others — they expected to move.

- Second, and, more important, every transition changes our lives — our role, relationships, routines and assumptions. You are now a homeowner; you are now a college president; you are now an account executive; you are now a licensed plumber. With each new role, you come in contact with new people and new colleagues — new relationships. In addition, each transition alters your routines. If you switch jobs, clearly where you go for coffee is different; if you move, where you take your clothes to be cleaned is new. And last, your assumptions about the world can change.
- Third, coping with transitions is a process that takes time. At first you are consumed with the transition. Until you craft a new life, you might well feel bewildered. Retirement is a perfect example of the challenge of change. When you were working, your roles, relationships, routines and assumptions were in order. When you leave that life, it takes time until you establish a new set of roles, relationships, routines and assumptions. The same is true when you experience any transition: divorce, return to school, job change, becoming a grandparent.

Rating your happy transition

1. Think of a happy transition and rate the degree to which it has changed your life on a 3-point scale: 1 is very little and 3 is very much.
 - 2. Now rate how much each part of your life has been changed
 - Your role: 1 very little, 3 very much
 - Your relationships: 1 very little, 3 very much
 - Your routines: 1 very little, 3 very much
 - Your assumptions: 1 very little, 3 very much

3. If everything has been changed, you will understand why your happy transition has been so challenging.

Taking charge of your happy transitions

1. If everything has changed, be prepared for a longer time to assimilate the transition. It is really all about timing.
2. Find a person — friend or therapist — to discuss how you are feeling.
3. Try to be patient as there is no quick fix. Think back over other transitions that have been resolved. Tell yourself, this will be resolved in time.
4. Keep a diary of your feelings. Writing your feelings down will dilute their power.
5. Put your happy transition in perspective. Keep reminding yourself that this too will pass.

Sarasota resident Nancy K. Schlossberg, a former professor of counseling at the University of Maryland, College Park, writes self-help books, blogs, lectures and runs workshops on coping with change. You can contact her through www.transitionthroughlife.com or at nancyks4@gmail.com.

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