

When life doesn't go according to plan



By **NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG**

Correspondent

We are always in the midst of transitions; some are “on-time,” others “off-time,” and, occasionally, some are “out-of-time.” Let me explain how timing relates to happiness.

On-time transitions: Joan was happy. Her marriage was good, her son completed college and had his first job. Things were moving along according to plan. When we are on-time like Joan we feel our life is following the script — we are OK, even happy.

Off-time transitions: On the other hand, Donna, whose daughter died of an overdose as a teenager, was devastated. Everything about it was terrible. After all, your children should be burying you not the other way around. Off-time transitions are those not occurring when you would normally expect them. We feel off-time

when we are either very early — a teenage pregnancy — or very late — getting our first apartment at age 40. It is being off-time that makes us aware of how life has not followed the script. When someone is off-time, unhappiness can occur — even feelings of failure.

For example, Dylan Suher, a recent college graduate defines his moving home as a failure.

“The feeling that the natural order of life — that you become an adult and then you leave home — has been disrupted.” (*New York Times*, July 17, 2011).

But college students are not alone. We live with internal clocks of what is appropriate to do at each age. The late psychologist Bernice Neugarten labeled this your “social clock.” We have all heard people say, “I’m too old to still live at home; I am too old to go back to school; I am too old to get divorced; my biological clock is ticking.” Each culture has different sets of timetables for events — when to go to

school, marry, have children, retire. These accepted timetables influence our reactions to our circumstances.

Out-of-time: Dan was hospitalized on and off for a year. During that time, he felt completely disconnected from life. He never looked at a newspaper, turned on the TV or read a book. He felt as if he were suspended in mid-air. Sociologist Gunhild Hagestad experienced a life-threatening illness and described what it was like to be out-of-time for over a year. She lost track of the world and focused solely on getting well. Another example: Marty cannot decide what to do. His wife is dying but he has a severe case of spinal stenosis and needs surgery. He is resisting surgery — he is afraid of putting himself out-of-time.

We often compare ourselves with others. If everyone is a grandmother and you are not, you wonder. If everyone else’s adult children have paying jobs and yours doesn’t, you begin to think, “all my friends

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kids are making it, what is wrong with my family.” Since being off-time can create the most discomfort. We need to address the question: “What can off-timers do?”

1. Recognize that you are not alone.
2. Realize that feelings of failure can stem from being off-time. You are not a failure — you are merely off-time.

3. Understand that there is no longer a right time to do things. Today we live with conflicting realities. It is wonderful that our lives don't have to follow a rigid plan. However, it is also confusing that our lives and futures are not predictable. For example, we see people marrying in their 40s, becoming parents in their 40s, retiring in their late 50s and changing careers in their 60s. Life is in flux, but we still hold onto rigid ideas of appropriate behavior for different ages. And maybe that is the problem — maybe there is no single age that is the “right” age to go to school, marry, retire. Maybe we need to make our social clocks more flexible for, after all, they are set by people. Our social clocks can be changed. Coming home after college, returning to school at age 60, divorcing at 70 can be the right time for someone. There are no rights and wrongs. According to Neugarten, “the psychology of the life cycle is not a psychology of crisis behavior or age so much as it is a psychology of timing.”

4. Put together a transition team. When my friend Jeanne

was moving from independent living to a nursing home, she gathered together people who could help her make the transition. Her son, granddaughter, best friend, doctor, former law partner and his wife, financial adviser and an interior decorator were part of the move from beginning to end. The interior decorator helped make the tiny room in the nursing home attractive. A purple bedspread, purple wall, and purple bathroom with her wonderful paintings made what could be a sterile setting into a place about which Jeanne felt good. It took a village to help her with her move.

Questions to consider

1. Think of transitions where you feel on-time, off-time or out-of-time.
2. Identify how you felt about each transition. Did you feel best when life was following a script and you were on-time?
3. How did you handle off-time transitions?

Finally, please share your reactions so others can learn from you.

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