

Let me introduce myself

I was a professor of counseling at the University of Maryland, College Park, taught at Howard University and Wayne State University and was the first woman executive at the American Counsel of Education. During my career, I studied transitions of all kinds. I was intrigued by several questions: What makes it possible for a person to cope easily with one transition and then experience difficulty with another? Are there ways to help people cope more creatively? To answer those questions, I studied geographic moves, adults returning to school, job loss, divorce, retirement and transitions that did not occur when expected — what I call nonevents. Now that I am retired, I write self-help books on coping with transitions, write blogs for Psychology Today, give lectures and run workshops on managing change. My mission is to help people cope creatively with the ups and downs of life. I am amazed at the resilience of those I interview and want to share their wisdom. Please share your stories and tell me what you want to know about. Contact me with comments, questions and suggestions through my website at www.transitionsthroughlife.com or email me at nancyks4@gmail.com.

— Nancy K. Schlossberg, Ed.D



Nancy K. Schlossberg

transitions: Navigating life's many changes

The balancing act goes on all through life: with small children, you try and balance work and family; with aging parents, it's work, leisure and family; if you suffer from chronic illness, you're weighing your health needs with the needs of others.

In my work on coping with transitions, I have found that success and the potential for happiness depends on our ability to balance our positive resources and our deficits. If our positive resources outweigh our negatives, we are able to cope more effectively. It's important to remember: No one thing ensures success; it is a combination — a balance.

For example, when Ruth Lee's husband

presented her with the prospect of retiring to Florida from Connecticut, she was paralyzed with fear. She describes it like this:

"I cried until my mascara dripped onto my clothing and my children worried that I was having a teeny weeny nervous breakdown ... I was crying at the idea of retirement ... I wondered what I would do all day ... I had worked on a newspaper ... not exactly The New York Times ... but ... it was intoxicating. For the next 14 years I thought I was a combination of Maureen Dowd and everybody who wrote for the style sections of the Times ... (and now I found myself) more in God's waiting room than in paradise. As for me, an abject failure in what a friend called 'retirement skills,' a dropout from bridge, canasta, mah jong and golf, I wondered what I would do all day."

But several years later, Ruth Lee feels satisfied with the life she has created.

"I sit on the terrace and watch the pelicans and I enjoy watching my husband enjoying," she says. "I have started painting and my work is regularly shown in art shows. I still write occasional articles for the paper."

So how did Ruth Lee turn what she viewed as a catastrophe that would compromise her identity and her sense of purpose into something positive?

She strengthened herself by talking to friends and sharing her concerns with her husband; she developed coping strategies and networked with galleries in her new Florida community; she made many new friends and found a community of like-minded people; she developed a new purpose by finding outlets for her creative endeavors as an artist and her identity is intact. As she says, "I didn't die in Florida."

Tips

Here are some tips that can help you balance your life so that your resources are strong as you navigate transitions.

STEP 1: Identify your potential resources or deficits. These are clustered into four major categories, what I call the 4S's: Situation, Self, Supports, **STEP 1**



Thank you

relationship:

Top 10 life tips

Those little things that we've been told all our lives wander into the deeper recesses of our minds, and we sometimes only remember them when it's too late. Here are a few reminders that should make your life easier.

1. Remember what you want in the big picture instead of what you think you must have this very moment. Most things we desire are not needs; they are wants. Being wise with your money promotes self-confidence and peace of mind.



Dr. Barton Goldsmith

2. Get a good night's sleep. If you are tired, you cannot function at your best, and you need to be at the top of your game as much as possible. So turn off the TV and sleep. It's good for you, emotionally and physically.

3. Don't loan money to those close to you. If you feel they deserve your help, make it a gift, because an unpaid loan can undo a friendship. I usually offer to give 10 percent of what's requested and suggest the person find nine more friends like me.

4. Write thank-you notes by hand. Hardly anyone does this anymore, yet it can be so meaningful. Taking the time to write a thank-you note shows that you truly appreciated the gift.

5. Give some love to a person in need. Visit a rest home where you don't know anyone and have a conversation with a stranger. Or go to the hospital and volunteer. You will feel better for it.

6. When someone loses a pet, don't say, "Well, it was only an animal." People bond with their pets, and those pets become family members. So be sensitive when someone you know suffers such a loss.

7. When you think back on your life, focus on the good that has come your way, not on what you think you may have missed. Remember that no matter how many goodies other people you know have, your life is probably more abundant than those of most others.

8. Slow down! Some people try to pack as much as they can into a day or a vacation. If you take a little more time getting things done or going places, you won't burn out and you'll see much more.

9. Read a book that you've read before. This is like reconnecting with an old friend. Plus, rereading an old book will call forth memories from the time you last read the story.

10. Give yourself a gift. It may be traveling to a distant land or simply taking the day off. Whatever you decide on doing, enjoy it with every ounce of energy and appreciation in you. Know that you deserve it.

STEP 1:

1. Situation: What's going on in your life at the time of change?

2. Self: What are your inner resources? What are your personal strengths — things you do well that help you deal with change? For example, are you optimistic, resilient and able to deal with ambiguity?

3. Supports: What people and activities can you count on for support during your transition?

4. Strategies: Are you able to use a variety of coping strategies? How can you steer your transition?

STEP 2: Apply the 4S system.

People often ask, "Should I change careers?" "Should I move to a new city when I retire?" There are no easy answers to these and other questions about transitions. However, one can look at the 4S's and ask: Is my Situation good at this time? Do I bring a resilient Self to the move? Do I have lots of coping Strategies in my repertoire? If all S's are positive, a move might be a good decision. However, if your Situation is problematic, your Supports minimal, you might want to delay the decision until you have built up Supports in the new community and your Situation improves.

STEP 3: Strengthen resources.

After you have identified which resources are working in your favor, you can strengthen those that are working against you. For example, there are books on imaging yourself thin. If imaging alone were the answer, I would be thin as a rail! I learned that it is not one factor, such as optimism, imaging or therapy, that makes the difference. It is the balance of positives to negatives.

And remember, the operative word is "time." Transitions take time. If you allow time to grieve over the things that you will miss from your previous life and give yourself time to recognize that things will come together as you start working on "getting a life," you will have a good shot at happiness.