

Is CHANGE challenging you?

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12:00 a.m. Monday, Nov. 20, 2017 [Living](#)

Let's say your boss fires you and your longtime boyfriend dumps you — in the same week.

Your life has just left the comfort zone and careened at top speed into the Big Transition Zone.

Will you console yourself with a case of cabernet and an endless loop of Linda Ronstadt lamenting “Poor, Poor, Pitiful Me”?

Or will you pause. Take a breath. Have two glasses of cabernet, then serve yourself a reality check:

Crap happens.

The worst crap usually happens unexpectedly.

You can't control everything in life — especially if you continue to gulp cases of cabernet.

What will you do? How will you behave when it seems like your whole universe is in retrograde?

Here's where therapists like Nancy Woolley, of Royal Palm Beach, come in.

Woolley is forming a group specifically to deal with major life transitions — since how we navigate transition is an indicator of everything we do.

(This is also why people watch “This Is Us” on NBC. That show is transitions-a-go-go, with time-traveling thrown in.)

We asked Woolley, who works at Ingram & Associates in Royal Palm Beach, what three things readers should do right now if they've been hit with a major life transition like the loss of a loved one, a job or a physical move.



Clarify and identify: What has happened to me? How do I feel about it? And why?

Feelings rise up instantly — but it takes a while to understand why you're feeling what you're feeling.

“Ask yourself, ‘what do I need?’ ‘How do I cope with this?’” Woolley says.

This is a slow, step-by-step process, but you must first acknowledge and understand your feelings.

The best way to do this is to share them with people you trust, and let your support system give you feedback. The worst thing to do is avoid dealing with your feelings.

One of society's biggest issues, Woolley says, is that people are now connecting with their phones, not their friends. This "internet addiction" has literally changed people's brains.

"Because the phone is an object that cannot fulfill you the way your friends or family can, disconnected people do not know where to turn when hit by transitions," she says.

"The other night I went to dinner at Anthony's Coal Fired (Pizza) on (U.S.) 441, and I saw a family — a mom, dad and two children — all on their phones. There was no human connection there."

This behavior troubles therapists like Woolley, who are watching young people grow up with no social skills, no appropriate way to assert themselves and few coping skills to navigate life's inevitable transitions.

Shift your thoughts.

Instead of looking at change as a horrible thing, shift your focus to think "this is an opportunity for exciting change and growth, an opportunity to do something different that's exciting and fun," Woolley says.

First, deal with what you're feeling, then learn to deal with what you are feeling by shifting your thoughts.

"This makes a major difference — and it takes time. Step-by-step."

If you get stuck in repetitive, negative thoughts, or if you hold on to past grievances and hash them over and over in your mind, your transition will take longer.

Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. You'll suffer longer if you don't shift your thoughts.

Build up your self-esteem and define your identity.

Transitions are hard. People who navigate them most smoothly have key characteristics, Woolley says.

They have good social skills and good assertiveness skills. They have confidence, self-esteem, a solid sense of their identity and resilience.

People without these traits are thrown by transitions because they lose their identity.

They think: Who am I without that boyfriend? Who am I when my children leave for college? Who am I without that job?

"Our identity develops over time based on who we are with and what we are doing," Woolley says.

When who we are with and what we're doing changes, we need to clarify: "Who is it that I am?"

In Oprah Winfrey's new book, "The Wisdom of Sundays: Life-Changing Insights from Super Soul Conversations," author Daniel Pink advises people to come up with a sentence describing who they are.

People with strong identities can sum themselves up in one sentence.

President Abraham Lincoln's sentence might be: "He preserved the Union and freed the slaves." Oprah says her sentence is "I teach people to lead their best lives by leading my own."

What is your sentence?

"People may not think about their identity until they go through a transition, and then they are lost," Woolley says.

"These people tend to stay with a painful situation and go over and over it — when they need to accept it and let go, so they can move on."

Moving on means knowing yourself, deciding what you want for the future and setting goals.

And remember: Progress happens slowly and one step at a time.

As Pink says: "Ask yourself at the end of every day: Was I better today than yesterday?"

If the answer is no — and it will be on many days — that's OK.

The next morning, he says, you'll get up with more resolve to make that day better. Just take it one day at a time.

Have you navigated a transition and come out better than ever?

Tell us! Send your story with a photograph, your name and the city you live in to pbfeatures@gmail.com. Please put "Transitions" in the subject line. "Navigating Transitions" will run occasionally in Accent.