

Coping with Change

Overview

Ways to cope with change.

- Reacting to change
- Understanding the benefits of change
- Change and stress
- Helpful tips on coping with change

Change is a natural part of life, and everyone faces it at one time or another. Most of us are continually making small adjustments that reflect our changing needs or interests -- trying a new restaurant, updating our wardrobe, or finding a more efficient way to do a task at work.

Reacting to change

How you react to a change may depend on the results you think it will bring. You may feel excited about change that involves a gain, such as a new baby or a promotion to a new rank. But you may worry about a change that involves a loss, such a divorce or a move to a new duty station. Or you may find it much easier to make gradual adjustments than to face a sudden upheaval in your everyday life.

Accepting a sudden, unexpected change can be one of the most difficult challenges in life. You want to have control over the situation and make everything better, but no matter how hard you try, you just can't control some things. A better way to cope is to accept an uncontrollable change for what it is. When you accept the reality that you do not have full control over what happens in life, then it becomes easier to cope. The best strategy for coping with change involves focusing on what you can control, and trying to let go of what you can't.

Even if you look forward to a change, adjusting to new realities can be stressful. One key to coping with the difficulties is remembering that most people can adapt well to change with support. Depending on the nature of the change you face, you may want to turn to your family or friends, your unit commander or fellow service members, your installation family support or community service center, or a support group whose members know what you're going through and want to help.

Understanding the benefits of change

Many people have intensely negative reactions when they first hear that they'll be facing a big change. Some people cry or become angry. Others think, "It isn't fair," "I'll never be able to handle this," or "I'm too old to learn a new way of doing things." It may help to remember that a change -- even if you didn't want it -- can be beneficial. Some of the rewards of change can include:

- *It can bring exciting new opportunities.* Almost every new experience has both advantages and disadvantages. If you don't like certain aspects of a change, you may find that you love other things about it.

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- *It can help you stay flexible.* It's easy to fall into a rut or become "set in your ways." A change in one area of life can help you stay flexible and make other needed changes.
- *It can build self-confidence.* Many experts believe that if people don't change, they don't grow. Staying in a comfortable situation can be fine for a while. But over time, it can become tedious or cause you to lose confidence in your ability to do well at other tasks or in another setting.
- *It can educate.* New experiences can bring greater knowledge, awareness, and expertise if you allow it.
- *It can help you focus on your priorities.* Change can give you a new perspective on yourself and others. Sometimes when you are forced to make choices and decisions, you realize what is really valuable to you.
- *It can make you stronger.* When you accept a change, you can find something positive in it. When you successfully cope with a tough change, it will help you become stronger for the next change.

Change and stress

Although change can be rewarding in the long run, it can seem very stressful at first. Depending on the nature of your adjustment, the difficulties can last anywhere from a few days to several years.

Change can be both physically and mentally stressful. As a rule, the larger the change, the more stress you may face. Many people find it particularly difficult to move from one major stage of life to another -- for example, to adjust to leaving school, having a child, reaching midlife, becoming a stepparent or grandparent, or retirement.

There are many different kinds of changes and everyone reacts differently to events. Some people may feel stress because of events that are happy ones, such as a wedding or the birth of a baby. Others may have trouble coping with divorce, controversy at work, or a move. And there are also smaller events that can bring about change that could cause stress, such as an upcoming holiday, trouble with in-laws, or even a vacation.

Because so many different changes can cause stress, it's important that you are able to recognize the signs of stress. The physical and mental symptoms of stress include:

- headaches
- depression
- anxiety
- fatigue

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- overeating or loss of appetite
- insomnia
- mood swings
- poor concentration
- stomachaches or other digestive problems
- neck- and backaches
- dental problems such as grinding teeth at night
- alcohol or drug abuse
- eating disorders
- heart trouble
- sexual problems

If you keep having these symptoms long after a change has occurred, you may want to talk to a doctor or counselor about ways to cope with stress.

Helpful tips on coping with change

Change is usually easier to accept if you feel confident that you can deal smoothly with new experiences. Here are some tips:

- *Anticipate change.* Take steps to avoid becoming rigid and afraid of new experiences. Throughout life, keep making friends, exploring a variety of interests and activities, and accepting new challenges at work.
- *Take care of your physical and emotional health.* If you're facing a big change, take extra care to eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, get enough sleep, and limit your alcohol consumption.
- *Learn some relaxation techniques.* You might find it helpful to take a yoga class or listen to relaxation tapes, which are available at most bookstores and public libraries. Or set aside a few minutes each day (in the morning, at night, or on your lunch hour) to visualize yourself remaining calm and happy.
- *Keep an open mind.* Try not to jump to conclusions about the change you're facing. Just because you haven't done something before doesn't mean you won't like it.
- *Gather information.* The most stressful thing about change may be the uncertainty it brings. To ease your anxieties learn as much as you can about what you'll be facing. Do research on the Internet or at the library. Talk to friends and fellow service members who've faced the same kind of change and ask what helped them the most in dealing with it. Or read a book such as *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Simon & Schuster, 1998) by Spencer Johnson, which talks about different styles of coping with change.

- *Limit or “pace” your changes.* Try not to take on a big change before you’ve adjusted to another one or a lot of smaller changes all at once. If you know that you’re already experiencing stress, if possible, try to postpone making big decisions that will bring about more change, and possibly, more stress.
- *Talk about your feelings with people who can help.* Be as specific as you can about your concerns. You might say to your spouse, “I have more responsibilities at this new duty station and it’s become harder for me to make dinner every night. I’d like to hear your ideas on what we can do about this.”
- *Consider joining a support group.* If a change feels too big to handle alone, consider joining a support group for people who are going through a similar experience. You might join a group for stepparents, newcomers to a community, or people who have begun caring for an older adult with Alzheimer’s or Parkinson’s disease. Check with your installation family support or community service center for support activities. You can find groups listed in the weekly calendar in community newspapers or by searching the Internet for a national organization devoted to the issue that concerns you.
- *Consider seeing a professional counselor.* Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Even strong people need support and guidance when faced with tough circumstances.
- *Hold onto your sense of humor.* When you’re feeling stressed, rent a video or DVD of your favorite comedy or go out to lunch with a friend who always makes you laugh. Or write about your experiences in a journal. Even if you have trouble finding the humor in your situation right away, you’ll be able to see it when you re-read your journal later on, which may help you cope with future changes more smoothly.

Resources

Resources are available to support you as you face the challenges of change.

Your installation’s support services

Depending on your service branch, your Fleet and Family Support Center, Marine Corps Community Services, Airman and Family Readiness Center, or Army Community Service Center can help you find resources to deal with change.

Military OneSource

This free 24-hour service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues. You can reach the program by telephone at 1-800-342-9647 or through the Web site at www.militaryonesource.com.