

25 Suggestions for Handling Transition Successfully

1. Distinguish the changing circumstances from the process of transition. The former can be accomplished quickly, but the latter will take months – even years.
2. Distinguish the transition process from any personal resonance it may set off. The present is significantly different from the past. You have changed in some very important ways. What was then, was then. This is now, and endings, temporary periods of disorientation, and new challenges no longer need be traumatic in the same old way.
3. Make plans for dealing wisely with the changing circumstances, and seek help if you need it in dealing with the pain that comes from old hurts resonating. But before you go too far down either the practical or the therapeutic path, consider things from a transitional perspective. Transitions are the way in which we leave behind an old no-longer-adequate reality, gestate a new one during a “season in the wilderness” and reorient our lives around it with new purpose and new energy.
4. What is it time for you to let go of now? Not an external thing, but an inner sense of yourself or others, a dream about the future, a value-system or a set of inner rules or taboos? Some way you have had of making meaning in your life? Some way you’ve had of dealing with problems?
5. If it feels as though you have suffered a whole cluster of losses or setbacks lately, what is the message? What is the larger, less tangible thing that you need to let go of?
6. Whom can you talk to about this? You need someone. At the very least, write about it in a journal. What does it feel like? What are your worst fantasies about what might happen? Have you ever been through something like this before? What did you do then? What did you later wish you had done then?
7. How can you celebrate this ending you are experiencing? What actions or events would give form to its inner meaning to you? Would you want these things to constitute a semi-public ceremony or simply a private ritual?
8. If you find yourself very fearful about the possible outcomes of your ending – for inner endings do have external outcomes in many cases – do a “worst-case” scenario of what might happen and what you’d do about it. With each outcome, ask yourself what you’d do in that case.
9. Remember that you’re part of a number of “systems,” and that any ending you make is going to affect others. Don’t automatically expect their support, for you are in effect forcing an ending upon them as well. Nor should you treat conflict that may develop with such others as simply an obstacle in your path. It may well help you to articulate the issues and see the implications of how your life is changing. (It may also – heaven forbid – show you where you’re just plain, flat-out on the wrong track.)
10. Not everything ends in an ending, of course. There will probably be continuities in other areas of your life, and this may be the time to strengthen them. If you’re changing careers, it’s wise to strengthen ties at home. If you’re getting a divorce, it’s a good idea to make sure that your friends are there for you. It may even be time to go back and pick up an old

interest that you haven't pursued in years, something that ties you back to the person you were before you became the one who's making the present ending.

11. Expect to experience the elements of mourning at the losses you suffer. Kubler-Ross talks about the typical sequence of Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Despair and Acceptance. Also typical are sadness, Anxiety and disorientation. Whatever the list, acceptance is the last step, not the first, and you get to it only after going through the others.
12. Think about how the present transition fits into the path of your own development. If you had to give it a title (like a chapter title), what would you call the present transition: "Growing up at last"? "Coming to terms with the universe"? "A star is born"? Or what?
13. The emptiness and confusion of the neutral zone is always troublesome and can be terrifying. Recognize it for what it is, however. It is a "time in the wilderness," like the literal wilderness times during the traditional rites of passage. You are out there (or "in there"), away from the old, familiar sense of things, letting your old attitudes and behaviors die out and clearing the ground for new ones. Traditional cultures knew that solitude was important during this time, and it still is. Can you give yourself an opportunity for solitude? Think about how to do that.
14. The neutral zone is particularly distressing when you can't afford to take a literal time-out to live it through. The kids have to be fed and the reports written and the bills paid. To keep up functioning during this time when you have lost your old inner supports is difficult, but is helped by providing yourself with temporary arrangements and agreements and schedules to get you through. The old way won't work any more, and this is not the time to make long-term promises about a new way. What short-term ways can you think up to get through the coming weeks and months?
15. The neutral zone used to be considered the site of visions and voices. In the Old Testament, the word for "wilderness" is also the word for "sanctuary." The Plains Indians called their journey into the neutral zone a Vision Quest. And this is not just a so-called "primitive" idea. The no-man's-land between what was and what will be is a time when we are most in touch with our creative unconscious and most able to break out of old thought forms and see things in wholly new ways. What can you do to encourage such insight and innovation? You'd also better start keeping some kind of a record of your insights or ideas.
16. You're going to have moments (or days or weeks) of discouragement during this neutral zone phase. You may find yourself idealizing how things used to be and thinking seriously of trying to turn back the clock. That's natural and isn't a sign that you've taken a wrong turn. But it is important to keep a realistic view of the past and its present unworkability. Even if the outcome of the transition is a return to the situation you have left, it is always to a subjectively different situation or to a different relation to the situation. You will be different, so it will be different too. That old writer was right: You can't go home again.
17. During the neutral zone phase, you may feel that you're hung up on a big rock. Stuck. Unable to go forward or backward. Faced with an insoluble problem. It's like being shut up in a little room with a large beast: there isn't much room to breathe, and you'd do anything to find an unlocked door. Before you use up all your energy trying to devise an escape, turn back toward your grim cell-mate and learn all that you can about it. What is this problem? Get to know it inside and out. But don't just study it objectively: let it talk to you in its own

words. Really. Imagine that you are striking up a conversation with the “problem.” Say things to it. Imagine its replies. Get into the dialogue. Be the problem and speak as it would. If you can do this, you are sure to learn things about the problem you haven’t known before. You may even find out that you are holding on to the problem and keeping it alive.

18. This wilderness time is a good one for thinking about what you really want at this point in your life. Not what you used to want, but what you want now. Today. Ask yourself that. Note that some of the things you say you want are really “wishes”: “I wish I had \$1,000,000.” “I wish I were better looking or younger.” These are sincere wishes, but they require a Fairy God-Mother with a wand. They are not wants. “I want to make some money and live decently for a change.” “I want to lose weight...get my nose fixed” or whatever. Those are things that you could do. People do them all the time. A want motivates you; a wish enervates you. What do you want?
19. As you come out of the neutral zone, you will find things “coming together” in mysterious ways. Things will take shape inside you: goals will become clear, plans will take shape, practical actions will occur to you. You can try to force these things earlier, but they just don’t knit together properly until you are ready for them. Externally too, things may come together in strange ways that seem coincidental and accidental. But it’s the same process happening. The new chapter of your life is taking form. When this happens – and, again, it can’t be rushed, so don’t try to force it now if this isn’t yet the time – you will do well to begin to structure the process. Keep a record of it. Write down your objectives. Trace the path back from the objective to where you are and figure what you have to do to reach it. Push yourself toward specificity: What do I need to do? What should I do first, and second, and third? What can I do this coming week? Make lists. This is a time to act.
20. As you begin to explore new territory, outwardly and inwardly, you will find yourself being harangued by old inner voices: you’re too dumb, too weak-willed, too headstrong, too selfish, too old or too young to do that. You can’t do that! Recognize these statements for what they are: old prohibitions that were once intended to keep you from harm, but that have outlived their usefulness. They are all-too-successful childhood limits that were set to keep us from getting run over or ridiculed by the other kids, to keep us from tearing up the neighbor’s lawn or injuring the dog. But they are no longer adequate voices to follow. We need limits and guidance – but we need ones that correspond to present realities. When the old ones appear, just thank them very much for remembering you after all these years, and say that you’re doing fine. And if they don’t ease off, yell at them a little.
21. One phase of our lives seldom prepares us properly for the next. In fact, it may prepare us very badly. We have to unlearn old things and learn new ones. What do you need to learn to deal successfully with the new beginning that you face? Transition usually results in a learning project of some sort. Perhaps it is a formal degree program, but more often it is some skill or information we need – perhaps not a way of doing something new, but a way of being a new way. Whatever the case, what do you need to learn now? And what would be the best way to learn that?
22. As the new beginning starts to take shape, you’re likely to find that it doesn’t fit with your life as you have been living it. Change produces transition, which produces new change. And on and on. One painful part of this line of dominos comes when you realize that you

want something which someone else is not likely to go along with. (“I’d like to move to the country, but my spouse would leave if I did.”). Before you toss in the towel or walk out on your spouse (before he or she can walk out on you), do two things:

First, check out the accuracy of your impression. You may be surprised to find that his/her resistance was really in your head. You’d be amazed how often that is the case, so don’t dismiss the possibility.

Second, talk it out with this other person, but don’t focus on the positions each of you is taking – you want to, and the other one doesn’t. Instead, focus on the interests each of you is trying to protect or promote. What’s behind the positions? The reason for doing this is that there are always several ways to reach one end, and a little creative thinking may turn up a way that you can both get what you really want.

23. As you move forward into the next phase of your life, look back at the past. A new future is likely to create a new past. One way to cultivate the future is to look at the past with new eyes. This isn’t just a trick way of seeing things either, for the past is basically the story of how you got to this particular present. And when that present begins to change, you need a new story. And a new story will reinforce the present. What about writing your autobiography, or if that is too much, what about spending two hours telling the story of your life into a tape recorder? I can guarantee you’ll discover something about yourself in the process.
24. If your new beginning involves something very different that is also very big, you’re likely to feel overwhelmed. All your enthusiasm begins to wane and you feel that you’re getting nowhere or that it’s too hard. Big changes are like that, and the secret is to break them down into small steps. Alcoholics Anonymous, whose members are going through a huge transition, talks about taking just one day at a time: not “giving up drinking,” but only “getting through today (or even the next hour) without a drink.” Little steps add up. They build confidence. Time is on your side, and the longer you can keep moving, the less likely you are to stall. Set yourself short-range goals that you have a fairly high likelihood of reaching. Make them public. At the same time you’re building your own confidence back, you’ll be convincing someone else that you’re for real.
25. Finally, see transition realistically for what it is... a long process. Don’t confuse it with “change,” which can happen overnight. There will be changes along the way, of course, times when you suddenly discover that a difficult thing is much easier, that an old feeling isn’t bothering you any more, that you really do know where you are going at last. But those are outcomes of the transition process, and that process takes time. As they say, “It takes nine months to have a baby, no matter how many people you put on the job.” So give yourself a break. Don’t expect miracle cures and don’t blame yourself when they don’t materialize. Don’t hold yourself to some high ideal of production or efficiency during the transition either. Those will come later.