

Sense and Psychotherapy

Thoughts on Psychotherapy and Living

Winter 1998

Dear Reader,

As befits a newsletter devoted to change, I'm about to make a transition of my own. In January, I am moving my psychotherapy practice to a new location. I will be joining Associated Counselors of Silicon Valley, a group practice in San Jose. Though only a short distance from my current office, this move is an exciting step for me. I'm leaving my solo practice in favor of a situation where I can have daily interaction with other therapists. I see this as a wonderful opportunity to hone my therapeutic skills and expand my professional contacts.

Pondering this move has given me the chance to reflect upon the range of changes, both physical and emotional, we face in our lives. It seems that a significant portion of my job as a therapist is to assist my clients as they face change in their own lives. At times, they seem nearly overwhelmed, yet I'm constantly amazed by the strength, resiliency, and capacity for positive growth they can show under the most difficult circumstances.

I hope I will have the same courage in my own upcoming move. I'm looking forward to the challenge.

Wish me luck,

Just the facts...

- Typically, Americans will change residences about a dozen times in their lifetimes.
- Studies indicate that most Americans will change careers 3 or 4 times during their working years.

Coping With Change

One of the most common reasons my clients come for counseling is to seek help in coping with change. Change can come in an almost infinite variety of shapes and sizes. Sometimes it seems to evolve slowly, even controllably. Other times, it arrives as an abrupt, unmanageable event. The stress it causes can manifest itself in a variety of ways, from irritability or anxiety, to depression, even to substance abuse. Specific reactions depend on many factors, including temperament, physical circumstances, and the size and strength of one's support network. Learning to cope with change is a lifelong process, and I work with my clients to help them develop skills they can use to do this productively, skills they can draw on throughout their lives.

Almost 30 years ago, a group of psychiatrists developed a scale rating the severity of different life changes. As common sense would dictate, those changes with the greatest psychological impact were major life events, such as death of a loved one, divorce, or personal injury. One of the most remarkable features of the scale, though, is the number of positive events listed: marriage, pregnancy, birth of a child. We often fail to appreciate the stresses associated with the positive changes in our lives. People tend to gravitate toward routine and predictability, and any change, even a positive one, disrupts that routine.

Psychologists are attempting to unravel the complex interplay of factors which determine how well we react to change. Numerous studies have shown links between the frequency of change, stress, and illness. We are only beginning to understand the dramatic effects of stress on our immune systems, hormones, and brain chemistry. The more we understand of our emotional, physical, and intellectual responses to stress, the better we will be able to predict, treat, and ultimately avoid its harmful consequences.

Although it's easy to focus on the negative consequences of change, it can provide opportunities for personal growth by pushing us out of our comfort zone and into the unknown. Change can open us up to entirely new insights, and force us to find new and creative ways of facing the world. We are most open to altering our coping patterns during times of crisis. With the proper support and encouragement, we can take insights and skills gained at these times and use them to cope more constructively with change in the future.

As young adults, we are largely unconscious of how our bodies are changing, but as we grow older (and hopefully wiser), many of us experience a growing sense of our own mortality. Often, we first become conscious of this through the illness and death of people near and dear to us, a painful and enlightening experience. Many people view physical change, and our response to it, as preparation for transitions we will face as older adults. Skills and knowledge we gain from coping with change in other aspects of our lives can also help us a great deal as we confront challenges later in life. Change is an inevitable and unavoidable part of Life, and if we learn to accept it and cope with it productively, we may find we possess a crucial key to our own happiness.

New Places

By the time I moved to the Bay Area ten years ago, I had managed to accumulate more than ten previous addresses in four years. Though I had enjoyed my nomadic existence, I was ready to stay put for a while. I was fortunate to find myself in a stable network composed of my husband's family and friends. As I quickly discovered though, many of the people I met outside this initial small circle were transplants like myself. Most of them were, or had once been, in a situation similar to mine: a stranger landing in a new place.

Although each transplant's experience is deeply personal and unique, we all encounter some of the same issues. What often shocks new arrivals to the Bay Area the most is the incredibly high cost of living. The ramifications of this affect nearly every aspect of our lives, determining the type of dwelling we live in, the neighborhood we choose, where our kids go to school, our commute. The incredible pace and energy in the Valley can be at once compelling and frightening. It's a challenging, rewarding, and often emotionally taxing place to live and work.

It's easy to minimize the profound impact of moving, even for "natives" (I'm using the term rather loosely here by including myself). A move of only a few miles can drastically alter our daily routines. I'm surprised at how long it has taken me to "bond" with the house we moved into last

January. On more than one occasion, I've left a store or my office and started on my way back to our old house. I'm constantly amazed by the energy involved in such seemingly mundane tasks as learning new routes, finding local restaurants, even mapping the aisles in the local grocery store. It's no wonder couples argue, children act out, and many of us feel anxious and unsettled by a move.

Although moving can be a wrenching experience, it's often exhilarating and, looking back, incredibly worthwhile. For all its faults, I've found the Bay Area a wonderful place to live. And though I think my husband is more excited than I by the prospect of another fixer-upper, I wouldn't have missed our recent move. Many of my friends and colleagues seem to have had similar experiences.

Will we stay in the Bay Area forever? I don't know. It's my home now. I have the community and stability I was looking for a decade ago. Sometimes, though, the idea of a slower pace, a place where technology isn't king, where you can drive 30 minutes and be OUT of town is very appealing. Not only that, but looking back on the apprehension and excitement I felt when we first moved here, I wonder, "what if?" For now though, this is home and I very much appreciate the opportunities and experiences the Bay Area has provided me. We won't be moving again, at least not for awhile.

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I have accepted fear as a part of life - specifically the fear of change...I have gone ahead despite the pounding of the heart that says: turn back...

Erica Jong