

Daily Union Article
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Title: Family Change and Transition

Life offers us an ebb and flow of changes. Many may be changing the decorations they have up around their house. Young folks are changing classes from one semester to another. We are getting ready to change our calendars to a new year. While others are changing jobs or homes. These events of change often lead us into life transitions, as well. Change and transition, although often related, are really two different things. Change is situational while transition is psychological. It's not the events outside us that cause transition as much as it is the inner reorientation and redefining what has become or is becoming our new normal.

For example, I have an Uncle who has been struggling with his health. As his health declines, so has his cognitive abilities. He has quickly progressed from a state of mental alertness to moderately severe cognitive decline. With my aunt's passing several years ago, life has been an all-around challenge for my uncle. This has also created a challenge for my cousins who now feel responsible for his care. Moving him from his independent living on the family homestead to an assisted living facility is most certainly a change. But it is mostly a change for his children who are taking on the care decisions for their dad. The change is situational for them since they all live in their own homes with their own immediate family. They will still come visit, but now they will journey to their dad's apartment. For my uncle, it is mostly a transition – one in which the psychological impact is significant for him.

This is just one example of the many changes and transitions that can happen as we each journey through life. People and families are in transition due to economic, demographic, and social changes, at any given time.

Family relationships are affected by transitions. More women are in the workforce than ever before in U.S. history. According to the U.S. department of Labor, there are 74.6 million women in the civilian labor force, representing 47% of U.S. workers in all. The economic need a family has for both parents to work outside of the home continues to impact family relationships.

Family transitions continue as young adults commit to partners and begin to have children of their own. Other transitions families frequently face include getting a job, losing a job, separation-divorce-remarriage, disability, death, grief and loss of a family farm or home, as is the case with my uncle and his family.

Change and transition effect people differently. Some react negatively while others embrace it. When a person fights change that they have little or no control over, they often experience and increase in stress symptoms including increased blood pressure, muscle tension, conflict in their relationships at work and home, and increased use of alcohol and other drug use to "unwind". Feelings of frustration, worry, or exhaustion are other common stress symptoms.

Everyone will be faced with making a difficult transition at one time or another. Even when the transition is a positive one, it can still result in stress. As we let go of the past and

redefine our new normal, we often feel uncomfortable. A common way of dealing with this discomfort is avoidance.

When we ignore or avoid the feelings we have as change and transition occur, we develop patterns of thought that stand in the way of making new beginnings. The result is unresolved transitions.

People who have unresolved transitions have at least three choices:

- 1) Do nothing and continue to hold on to unpleasant, negative feelings.*
- 2) Relate old experiences to similar present experiences.*
- 3) Squarely face the old business and handle unresolved feelings and needs.*

Source: "Transitions and Changes: Practical Strategies", Colorado State University Extension", Fact Sheet No. 10.214

The first of these three choices is not going to have a positive impact on your ability to handle the transition. It will just perpetuate the misery you are feeling.

The second choice you can make for unresolved transitions, although more aggressive in nature, can help you face the challenge head on. It takes strong relationships and families to ride the storms that often come with making a transition.

Families that are resistant to the disruption of transition and change tend to have the following characteristics:

- 1) Balanced relationships between members that allow them to resolve conflict.
- 2) Ability to share beliefs and emotions with each other in a caring and responsive manner.
- 3) Acknowledge and celebrate events as a family, including birthdays, religious occasions, and other special events.
- 4) Ability to make sound financial decisions that contribute to the family's well-being.
- 5) Foundational strength through which families find the capacity to cope.
- 6) Maintain both physical and psychological health and well-being among all family members living together.
- 7) Enjoy leisure activities together.
- 8) Surround themselves with supportive and positive people including other family members, in-laws, relatives, and friends.
- 9) Follow routines in the family unit. Family meals, chores, togetherness and other ordinary routines provide continuity and stability in family life.
- 10) Keep traditions alive by honoring holidays and other important family experiences that are carried from one generation to another.

As my uncle makes the transition from farm to assisted living, he and his children will need to rely on the strength they have as a family unit to make the experience positive for everyone. While my cousins change their dad's environment, they will need to be attentive to the feelings he will have with the transition.

For more information about strengthening families, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research & Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!