

The Challenge of Life Transitions

Jim is finishing his senior year at East Catholic High School. He says he is excited for Boston College in the fall, but inside he is pretty scared. Jim will move away from his family and have to manage his own money, relationships, and academics, not to mention make difficult decisions regarding alcohol, drugs, and sex. Patty is Jim's mom, and she misses him already. He may be 18 but he is still her baby. Patty wonders what it will be like when she comes home from work to find Jim's bedroom empty and silent. Peter is Jim's dad, and Peter wonders whether his son has the skills to make it on his own. Peter himself is losing his dad to cancer, and he is struggling with the goodbyes to come.

Transitions are an inevitable and important part of life, but people rarely enjoy them even when they involve joyous events such as going to college. Jim, Patty, and Peter are all on the brink of life transitions. While the family wants Jim to go to college and become a successful adult, with that growth comes loss. Transitions occupy the time between when something we knew is gone or forever changed, but before we have had the chance to build anew. When we are in transition or preparing for one, we often experience anxiety, loneliness, and sadness. It is common for people not to know where they belong or what to do next. Transitions alter our life routines and relationships, so it is no wonder they are hard to deal with.

Just as we develop plans for work to do around the house or activities on the weekend, it is important to have a plan to take care of ourselves during transitions. This requires developing self-awareness with regard to what techniques or activities (e.g., exercise, reading, calling a friend) help to soothe us during stressful times. When we transition, routines such as family dinners and walks in a nearby park often get disrupted, and we need to expend more effort to make time for them and the emotional nourishment they provide.

Transitions also require us to tolerate the sense of nothingness and fear of the unknown that naturally fills the space where old life activities used to be. While these moments can be terrifying, it is important to recognize that they won't last forever and that we can spend time honoring and remembering the past as well as working to build for the future.

Perhaps most importantly, transitions require us to have reasonable expectations for ourselves. New schools, new jobs, and new homes are exciting, but not familiar. New neighborhoods do not lend themselves to establishing new relationships overnight. Adjusting to the loss of a loved one can be painfully slow. Transitions are a process, not an event. Once we acknowledge this, we can be intentional about taking care of ourselves and not rushing a process that takes time. Everyone goes through transitions, but how well we do it is up to us.

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