

Top Tips for Coping with Change

We live in a world of constant change, and although we may never get used to it or be happy about it, if we can't respond well to it, it can cause great stress and even distress. Given the recent experience too of a global pandemic, and all the change that has brought to our lives, and doubtless will continue to bring, we have put together some tips to help you if you sometimes feel the change is too difficult to cope with.

Probably the most important thing to do is recognise and accept that things do change. Sometimes a lot. Sometimes quite fast. Sometimes we have control, other times not. Sometimes we kind of knew the change was coming, others it feels like a shock. Being able to adapt to change and coping well with it is going to be critical to us all so it's important to acknowledge that it is happening – burying your head in the sand will not make it go away, in fact, you might miss something important.

1. Acknowledge and accept that change is inevitable.

If we invest a massive amount of energy into fighting inevitable change, we can cause high levels of stress and often for no good reason. That does NOT mean to say that we should not try to make our feelings known and influence the change where we can, but we also have to be realistic and recognise that sometimes, our energy would be better spent in being curious and exploring the change rather than fighting against it.

2. Pick your battles.

You may have come across the tool created by Stephen Covey, which encourages us to think about the things that concern us but to then split them into things that we have control over, things we can influence and things that are out of our control ... it can be a useful way to sort things out in your mind and recognise where you should prioritise effort. Little point investing huge amounts of effort into things over which we have very little, if any, influence or control, and learning sometimes that we just have to let them go and act on the things we CAN make a difference to. It's a great technique for giving yourself permission to let go of "stuff".

3. Positive change can still be stressful.

Even when positive, change can still create a feeling of stress or dread – a new baby, a new job, an opportunity to further your career with a presentation to the Board! Change is not always negative and can still create high levels of anxiety so the better able to we are to cope with the anxiety and work through it, the better – developing resilience is a key skill in coping with change. Stress is just your body's way of reacting to change. It's perfectly ok to feel stressed even when something good has happened—in fact, it's normal.

4. Resilience – willow rather than oak!

Sometimes people think that resilience is about being able to endure events, stand up to even the roughest and toughest stuff, but actually resilience is more to do with our ability to flex and bend and bounce back. Resilience is about picking yourself up and facing forward and having the motivation and courage to “go again”

5. Hang on to regular routine where you can during change

If you can, try to keep some things constant, almost as an anchor, and don't attempt to change too much, all at once, or you might just over challenge yourself. Routine and habit are good ways to allow your brain a little respite and chance to be “at ease” amongst the turbulence. The more change that is happening, the more important it is to keep some sort of “normal” in place.

6. Unhealthy coping strategies

Try to eat healthily, don't overload on sugar or carbs however strong the temptation – it has been found that carbs boosts serotonin, the brain chemical that is depleted by stress – but in the long run this might make us feel worse. Other habits might also creep in like drinking more caffeine or alcohol than usual, smoking more or use of other substances that help numb the uncomfortable emotions that change can bring. Being aware of this and thinking about your long term wellbeing is important as is having some form of exercise in your day – a walk round the block, dancing wildly to your favourite upbeat music, going out for a run – again activity is a good way to release our own feel good hormones and move stress out of your system during times of change.

7. Talk to others about how you are feeling

Another healthy coping strategy is conversation. Being honest and open with how you are feeling, especially if the change is causing you to feel worried or anxious. Sharing those feelings and talking about emotions is far healthier than bottling it all up and allowing it to consume you. Sometimes by sharing any fears, you may learn that others are also perhaps feeling the same, or indeed are able to offer you some reassurance.

8. Focus on any positives

Whenever we are faced with any sort of change, we can feel uncertain or doubt ourselves. Going for a job interview, committing to diet and exercise, stopping smoking – any change in our normal behaviour or environment can feel stressful and we might be tempted to avoid anything that would put us in that uncomfortable space – but equally if you don't risk the interview, you'll never get the job that you desperately want to do, without the diet you'll never wear that outfit you are keen to, without stopping smoking you will never be able to afford that trip overseas – try to focus on the positive that any change may bring and set small goals that move you closer to it.

9. Get proactive.

Ask questions, get involved in meetings or working groups, do some research, look for positive role models or examples – being proactive rather than reactive means you will be better informed and feel more in control – the feeling of being out of control is often the worst!

10. Vent, rant, sulk but then move on!

Suppressing emotion isn't good for anyone but try to vent in a managed and appropriate way and try not to turn it into a long term pity party ...energy is better invested in asking "how can we make this work/better/easier to deal with" rather than investing energy in emotion that brings no benefit after a while. Also, make sure you are not ranting inappropriately for example by posting on social media something that is either unprofessional, breaches confidentiality or you will simply regret in future.

11. Be kind to yourself

Human beings are often uncomfortable with change. We will experience a whole range of emotions and may sometimes get stuck in a rut. Forgive yourself and give yourself a break .. clear your head, focus on the positive potential and go again once rested.

Many people spend a great deal of time and energy trying to avoid change, but it will inevitably catch them up. If you can learn to cope with change, you'll lower your risk of anxiety and depression, relationships will be more positive and you will feel healthier. Being able to cope with change requires resilience, as we mentioned above and part of developing a more resilient mindset will require trying different ways of thinking and being – let's have a look at that in a bit more detail?

Check your thought patterns. In times of change, it's easy for your mind to cut corners and for the brain to over-react and trigger the panic button. You might see everything in black or white, or you assume the worst will occur. But if you take the time to examine your thought patterns and assess how rational they are, you might find some space to nudge your thinking towards more positivity and resilience. Sometimes just slowing down your racing mind, practicing relaxation techniques, such as mindfulness or deep breathing, can help you feel more in control of your brain and how you evaluate a major change. The brain is responsible for keeping us safe – so whenever the "fight or flight" stress response is triggered, we can sometimes go into overdrive, if we are not careful.

It can also be a good strategy to remind yourself about change, transitions and challenges you have successfully navigated in the past. Make a list of ways you've been resilient in your life then think about the traits and actions you have used before and what might be helpful to use again now. By focusing on your strengths instead of your weaknesses, focusing on the coping strategies and skills you have will help you will feel more empowered to meet and overcome what lies ahead.

Whilst it's useful to look to the past to find your strengths, sometimes you can feel too pulled into the future in times of change and move into wild imagination and anxiety. When you worry about what the future will bring or what mistakes you might make, you forget to be in the present and

observe what's happening around you. To bring yourself back to the present, get in tune with your body. Pay attention to how it responds to stress, and set aside time every day to relax, take some deep breaths, and bring your focus back to the present. Again this is where having an anchor point with regular routine helps and where that exercise we talked about can be a great way to clear your mind and press the reset button.

Another great technique to develop better resilience is to ask yourself "What is the worst thing that can happen here?". We are often scared of change because we fear the unknown. Don't forget, the brain loves certainty and routine and habit so any change will trigger the stress release, whether we are facing a sabre toothed tiger or indeed a job interview! Imagine all the different possible outcomes and then focus on what would be your best and worst case scenarios, and then think about how you would deal with them if they were to arise. We can often turn something trivial into something much bigger with faulty thinking, so let's try to tap into the rational mind and get plans in place. Sometimes we just need to get used to an idea which is why it is often good to "sleep on it and see how you feel in the morning" rather than over-reacting without any real thought.

Let's be honest, sometimes the change is very much not welcome or wanted though. However if this is something that is beyond our influence or control (remember Mr Covey?) we may need to try taking a reflective approach. Accepting that there are things beyond your control, and choosing to be comfortable with that fact, is likely to bring greater peace of mind than waging an unwinnable war. Try to see change as an opportunity to learn and grow, rather than as a setback, even if you have to fake it until you make it! We cannot make progress without change and especially in business, we have to accept that change is inevitable and we may not always be raving fans but sometimes necessity and survival have to come above "nice".

Try to focus again on the positives – see it as "better to survive" even if it does mean change, rather than "this change is unwelcome and I will fight and even sabotage" rather than give in to it. Try to make the best of the situation and reframe it if you can – rather than "the hassle of a longer commute" – perhaps view it as "10 minutes more to listen to a podcast". Rather than "further away from the shops" see it as "More of an incentive to bring a healthy packed lunch and save money" ... reframing takes practice, but can be hugely powerful and help you accept the inevitable with greater ease.

If you can manage to reframe it, and if the unwanted change is within your control, try as much as possible to take an active approach to dealing with it. Try using problem solving techniques or set some SMART objectives to chunk the issue down and make it more manageable. Creating a plan of action, changing what you can, influencing what you can and accepting what you cannot, working in collaboration with others – all of this will give you a much more positive and resilient attitude, which can only ever be a good thing.

Finally, if you really do feel overwhelmed and are struggling to cope, please do not suffer in silence, please ask questions and make your feelings known. It can sometimes be helpful to get professional support especially if the change is really big or you are coping with lots of different change all at once. Consider asking friends or family for help, ask questions of the right people at work, maybe

even think about getting in touch with a professional or listening service if the feelings are getting on top of you. There are lots of support services out there, especially if your employer offers an Employee Assistance Programme or equivalent and there is no shame in asking for help – in fact, that shows great courage and a positive attitude rather than simply sitting back and feeling overwhelmed.

The better we are able to respond and react to change, the better our state of mind and health will be. We hope you have found this article useful in giving you some positive steps and actions to think about. Every change is another chance to develop knowledge, skill and new behaviours as well as strengthen that resilience muscle – good luck!