



**Mentally Preparing
for Life's Transitions**

AKA: The Psychology of Transition

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It has become cliché

**“The only thing
constant in life is
change.”**

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Self Preservation Instincts

- Denial vs. Adaptation
- A balancing act. We use a lot of energy for both, and sometimes we use more energy to stay on one side of the continuum.
- Common belief: “we resist change”

Denial ←————→ Adaptation

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 **Definition of Change:**

- to make the form, nature, content, future course, etc., of (something) different from what it is (or from what it would be if left alone)
- to transform or convert

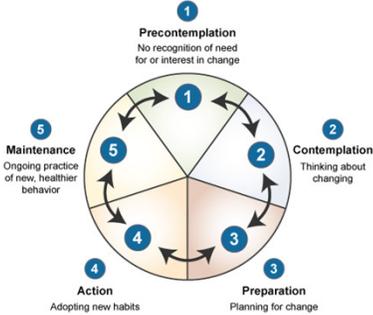
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 **Transition on the other hand...**

- Letting go of that piece of ourselves that we have to give up when and because the situation has changed.
- William Bridges – The Way of Transition
- This is actually what we resist because it is so deeply significant and personal.

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 **Psychological Stages of Change**



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Stage 1 - Precontemplation

- “Not ready” or avoidance - The change is not on the person’s radar screen yet.
 - Not speaking circumstantially here, we’re speaking psychologically
- If approached about a possible change, the person will typically (unconsciously) underestimate the pros and overestimate the cons with little to no actual information

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Stage 2 - Contemplation

- “Getting Ready” or overcoming ambivalence
- On the radar screen, starting to gather information
- Pros and cons are about equal as they are weighed
- Ambivalence can lead to long delays of months or years before taking action

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Stage 3 - Preparation

- “Ready”
- Begin with small steps
- Support from friends, family and colleagues is key
- Biggest concerns are usually if they take this action, will there be the payoff expected? Will it work out as hoped? What will happen?

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Stage 4 - Action

- “All in”
- Change is made, new behavior underway
- This can be a very motivated time, new experiences, new ways of reacting or interacting...often excitement of a new chapter

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Stage 5 - Maintenance

- “New Way of Life”
- Change is well established
- Old ways seem distant
- One may even question, “Why did it take me so long to come to this decision (action) (change)?”

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If only it were that simple...

- There are several compounding factors that influence a person’s readiness to change and to progress through the 5 stages of change.
- These factors are the three largest factors for our talk today and yet remain mostly, if not completely, unacknowledged

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**ELEPHANT in the Room #1**



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**Ego (False Self)**

- Psychological vice that masquerades as virtue for many professionals: the unmitigated identification of self with occupation, accomplishment and professional satisfaction. - WSJ
- One of the biggest fears for holders of respected positions is the potential loss of public esteem.

So WHY is it so difficult to let that go?....

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**Adding to that Egoic False Self**

- Legal profession adds new layers and dimensions – we are largely unaware of
 - Zealous advocacy;
 - Always the helper;
 - Confidentiality;
 - Isolated; Workload
 - Tomorrow never comes; prioritizing false self goals over true interests that do not serve a professional or reputational purpose
 - Success

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**ELEPHANT in the Room #2**



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**Anxiety**

- Venture into the unknown = uncertainty
- Instinctual drive to stay safe, self preserving – moving past those boundaries, by definition, creates anxiety
- Therefore, all change, big or small, is also accompanied by some form of anxiety
 - Might be insignificant or debilitating, but it is there

Insignificant ←————→ Debilitating

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**Anxiety continued...**

- Behaviors include:
 - Overthinking - identifying and planning for every possible contingency (A, B, C, and D) (then A1/A2, B1/B2, etc)
 - We invariably miss something anyway
 - Difficult to “trust the unfolding process”
 - Believe it is “all up to me” to create a result
 - Quite sure “other shoe will drop”
 - Catastrophising - forgetting to look back and see things that have worked out in the past
 - Lots of self-doubt and second guessing

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Common Example

- Staying in an unsatisfying job (practice area or practice setting) due to security fears (“Devil you know...”) – “Fear” of financial insecurity vs financially secure reality (leaving big firm example)
- Missed opportunities (not work related)

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ELEPHANT in the Room #3



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Grief



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5 Stages of Grief

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

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Let's talk about grief

- All change, no matter how big or small, whether we label it "good" or "bad" is accompanied by some form of grief
 - Might be insignificant or debilitating, but it is there

Insignificant ←————→ Debilitating

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Grief continued...Stories

- Which vacuum to keep?
- Why can't I let myself sell this house?
- Switching practices – leaving in-house
- The Veterinarian's Observation

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Resources

- Cultural mores about any form of grief today (excerpt from Joan Didion's book)
- The Grief Club by Melody Beattie
- The Way of Transition by William Bridges (one of many books)

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Notice any correlations?

Stages of Grief/Traits of Anxiety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denial • Anger/Angst • Bargaining/Planning • Depression • Acceptance 		Stages of Change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-contemplation • Contemplation • Preparation • Action • Maintenance
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Not always an exact correlation, but you can see the similarities and convergences of processes – how grief or anxiety can influence moving through stages of change.

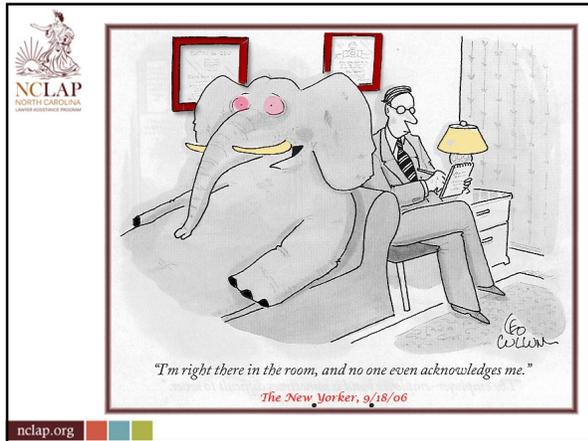
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Now put it all together:

- Unconscious over identification with job
- Anxiety that comes with change
- Unspoken, unrecognized grief that comes with change
 - That we're culturally not allowed to recognize or speak of
- All reinforcing denial stage (pre-contemplation)

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No Wonder...

- It is no wonder phasing out of law practice can be so difficult for us.
- Now that we know some of what is at play, what are some practical steps we can take to prepare?

Begin Simple Self-Reflection

- Look back on your own life.
 - Jot down 5 major changes or transitions you have been through in your life personally. Some common examples:
 - Going to undergrad or law school
 - Getting married or divorced
 - Having children (each child counts as an event)
 - Starting a job, leaving a job, switching practices
 - Moving to a new city



What can you identify?

Stages of Grief

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance

Stages of Change

- Precontemplation
- Contemplation
- Preparation
- Action
- Maintenance

Fears/Anxieties

- Overplanning
- Dreading
- Trying to control process or participants
- Being stuck due to uncertainty about change

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Predictor

- We tend to be creatures of habit and conditioned emotional response
- We usually have a standard repertoire of emotional responses
 - Knowing how we dealt with something in the past will help us anticipate it in the future so that we can prepare adaptive strategies
- Looking at big picture trends that stand out

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Assess Yourself

Job

Not identified ←————→ Totally identified

Anxiety

Insignificant ←————→ Debilitating

Grief

Insignificant ←————→ Debilitating

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Looking Ahead – Proven Strategies

- When dealing with the emotional and psychological transition of retirement, identify for yourself:
 - Where do you currently overly identify with your job/role?
- Strategy for dis-identifying – true example
- Analogous “work” – i.e., serving on boards (two most recent foundation presidents) (Projects of passion, Rotary, tutoring, taxes, mentoring) that still gives us the ego-perks

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Looking Ahead – Proven Strategies

- When dealing with the emotional and psychological transition of retirement, identify for yourself:
 - What outside interests have you maintained?
 - What outside interests can you start fostering now?

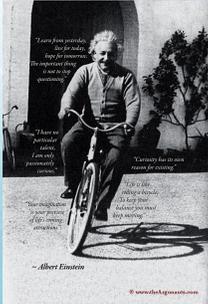
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A Smart Guy Said It

“Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance you must keep moving.”

~ Albert Einstein,
letter to his son Eduard, 1930



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What's On Your Plate?



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"Would you like to hear about our retirement plan?"

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"When we retire, I want to watch travel videos."

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Thank you!

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