

1 Understand Retirement Transitions

Setting a retirement date begins a significant change in our life and the psychosocial process surrounding that change commences. William Bridges calls this adjustment period to change, transitions. Understanding the stages of transitions helps us normalize our experience and improves our ability to move successfully into the future.

What are Transitions?

Transitions are the psychosocial process we go through as we respond to change. Unlike change that can be planned and scheduled on a calendar, transitions are fluid and gradual. Recall how your wedding day or bringing home your first baby was just the beginning of many transitions in your life! Retirement comes with many of these same adjustments through a series of stages.

The Stages of Transitions

There are three stages of transitions: endings, neutral zone and new beginnings.

Endings is the first stage when we realize what we're letting go. *All changes come with some endings.* While retirement begins an



exciting chapter in our lives, it also includes saying good-bye to colleagues, changing our professional identity, and leaving a familiar schedule. Emotions in this stage can include both happiness and sadness, relief and frustration.



Neutral zone is the stage between the old way and the new beginning. Familiar patterns fall apart and there is uncertainty about our purpose and how to use our time. Rather than jump into random activity and commitments, the better choice is to manage our anxiety by taking time to reflect and explore all choices. The neutral zone provides an opportunity for creativity, renewal, and development.

The final stage of transitions is *new beginnings*. This is when we regain our footing, our equilibrium. We're putting into place our vision for this second chapter of our life while celebrating the progress we've made through each stage of our transitions.

Track Your Progress

By understanding transitions, we get better at going through them. There is a Chinese proverb that says, "The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names." There is comfort and power in acknowledging: "I'm in the ending phase, that's why I'm sad." or "I'm feeling lost and anxious, I must be in the neutral zone."

Be aware of getting stuck. Pay attention that you're moving forward through the stages slowly, but surely. Getting stuck means you're overwhelmed with sadness, anger or anxiety, and can't find your way through it. This is the time to get help from someone you trust.



Transitions Truths

Transitions take longer than you think. While changes can have a start date and an end date, transitions do not. Retirement is one of the most significant events in our life, so be patient as you move through endings and the neutral zone. Most of us took years to discover what we wanted to be when we grew up; it's okay to take the time needed to chart your course for the next chapter.

New changes and transitions are just around the corner. Just as you settle into a new beginning, another change will occur.

This will require new transitions and it's not uncommon that we're in several at the same time. For example, you could be in the neutral zone of retirement and in the endings stage with a new health condition.



**Learning from
your transitions
will help you
move through
them better.**



Consider documenting the answers to these questions from your past experiences:

- What helped you move through the sadness of endings?
- How did you manage the anxiety of uncertainty?
- What process did you use in the neutral zone to make new discoveries?
- How did you celebrate new beginnings?
- What should be avoided while going through your transitions?
- Who helped you move forward?

William Bridges, Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes. (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019)

Summary

Understanding the phases of transitions provides a useful road map as we encounter each change in our life. While not easy, well-traveled transitions take us to new places of growth and discovery—places that can't be found any other way.



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