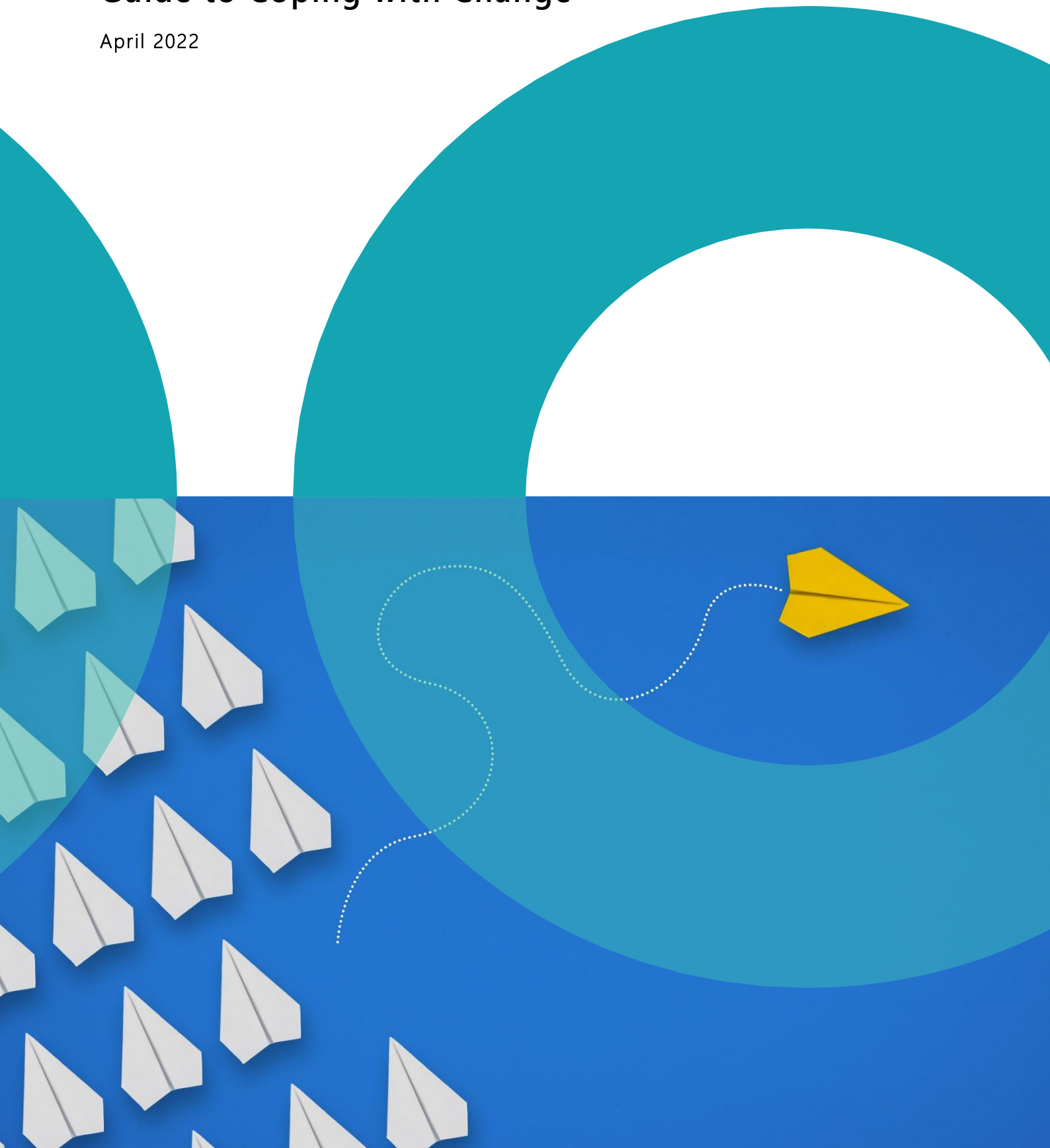




## Guide to Coping with Change

April 2022

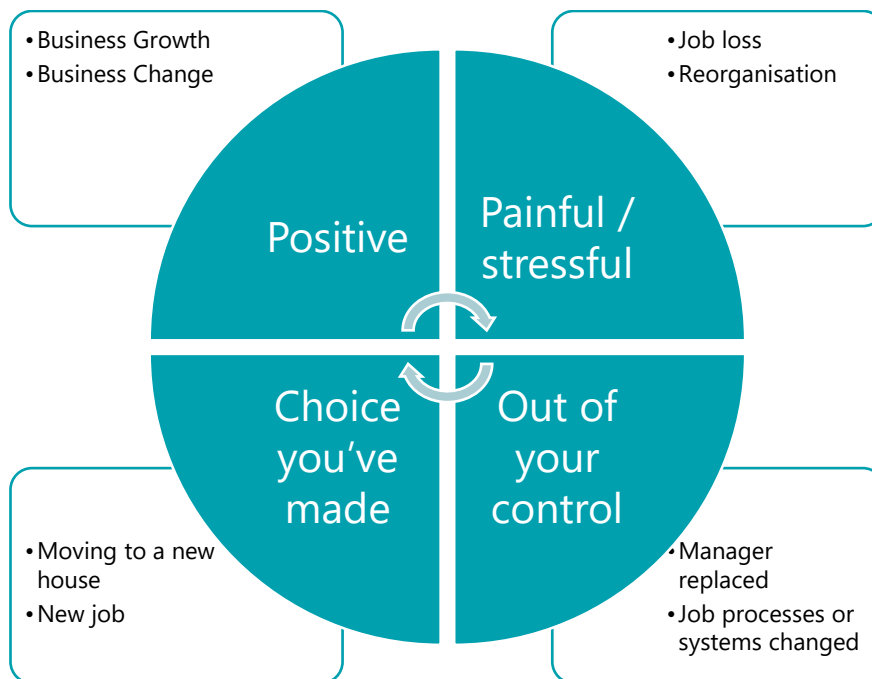


## Change can mean different things to different people

We know that there are lots of changes happening – everywhere. We hear the word applied all the time - in the media when we talk about our daily lives as well as when we talk about work.

Change is a verb – a doing word meaning to make or become different and has a wide variety of meanings for everyone.

Change can therefore mean different things to different people.



It can also be seen as global, constant, and inevitable. How we react to change can vary.

Reactions to change can include anger, fear, excitement, sadness, and resentment. There are also some more questions that you may want to think about yourself:

- Do you like change?
- Does change matter? and
- What are the risks of not changing?

For many of us its fear of change that affects us most. These fears are often associated with fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of criticism and the fear of the unknown.

In all cases though our attitude and reaction to change will likely determine how we experience it – irrespective of the reason for the change.

The aim of this guide is to help you understand about the different ways that we may approach change, the reactions that you might have in relation to change and the best ways of coping with it.

We can't control change, but we can control our attitude towards change and manage that.

**One of the most important concepts to understand about any change though is that the change and the process or period of changing are NOT the same.**

Change is an external influence that happens to all of us

Transition is what happens to our minds as we go through change

The difference between these can be subtle but it is important.

In essence - change is something that happens to us all, even if they don't necessarily agree with it. It is an external change influence that tends to happen quickly and can impact on how we both view our future hopes and opportunities at the time.

Transition, on the other hand, is internal: it's what happens in our minds as we go through the change. Transition usually occurs more slowly as we process the events and come to terms with them.

**Change can be regarded as situational, while transition is psychological.**

## Change as a stressor

Change is known to be a stressor for many people.

It can trigger the brain to respond as if it has been threatened resulting in the release of hormones that produce well-orchestrated physiological changes. This combination of reactions is often known as the stress response or fear – flight response. It evolved as an automatic survival mechanism to fight off a threat from something or someone and to flee to safety. Change can trigger these powerful effects on our body and emotions.

The effects that it produces can be broken down into 4 main groups – behavioural effects, physical effects, mental effects, and emotional effects.

Behavioural effects	Physical effects	Mental effects	Emotional effects
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Difficulty sleeping</li><li>•A change in your eating habits</li><li>•Smoking or drinking more</li><li>•Avoiding friends and family</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Tiredness</li><li>•Indigestion and nausea</li><li>•Headaches</li><li>•Aching muscles</li><li>•Palpitations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Becoming more indecisive</li><li>•Finding it hard to concentrate</li><li>•Suffering loss of memory</li><li>•Feelings of inadequacy</li><li>•Low self esteem</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Becoming easily irritable or angry</li><li>•Increased anxiety</li><li>•Feeling numb, drained or listless</li><li>•Increased sensitivity to comments</li></ul>

You may not experience all these effects but having some indicates that you are reacting to how the effect of change is impacting on you. At certain times as you respond to change you may notice some are more noticeable than others – this is all to be expected.

**Coping with change can be demanding, however if these symptoms persist for long periods of time – then you should seek support from a health professional.**

## Coping mechanisms

Studies have shown that people generally cope with change in two ways – escape coping or control coping.

**Escape coping** is based on avoidance – the person takes specific actions to help avoid the difficulties of change.

Escape coping could include deliberately missing training for a new working process or showing up late or too late to attend a meeting about the change. Other examples can include ignoring calls or letters from the business as well as some taking refuge in alcohol and drugs to avoid the situation.

**Control coping** on the other hand is positive and proactive. It's about managing your feelings, getting support, and doing what is required to be part of the change.

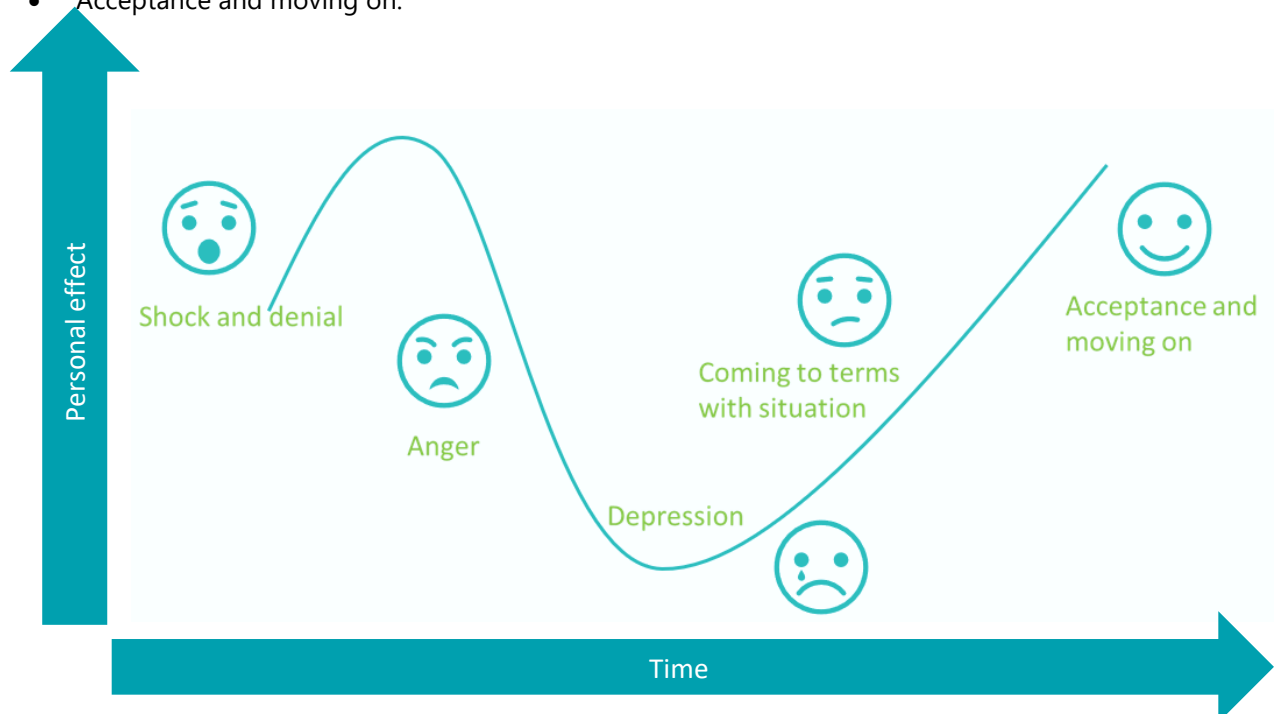
The reality is that most of us respond to change using a mixture of these coping behaviours.

Control coping is the better option to use as it is impossible to avoid the reality of change for too long without becoming exhausted.

However, that's not to recognise that change can be difficult – it can challenge how we think, how we work, the quality of our relationships – even our physical security and sense of identity. However, it must not be the end of the world for you.

Our response to change generally goes through four stages. These stages are:

- Shock and denial
- Anger and depression
- Coming to terms at the situation and,
- Acceptance and moving on.



Moving through these stages is rarely simple and linear. You might get stuck at one stage then rapidly move through another, you may then move back to an earlier stage before moving forward again- but again this is all normal and to be expected.

You are more likely to progress through these stages if:

- You acknowledge how you are feeling
- Draw on your support networks
- Aim to remain positive

Give yourself time to adapt and explore the facts around the change.

You must remember that change like grief is a cycle that has several stages that can be repeated at different times.

## Stage 1 Shock and denial

The first reaction to change is usually shock. It can sometimes feel like a physical blow.

The initial shock can also sometimes be short lived. What you may see is a temporary slowdown in what you are doing and a loss in productivity – these are all normal effects. If you are usually clear and decisive you may find that you might want and seek more reassurance and guidance. Agreed deadlines maybe missed. You might also find that you are just going through the motions of daily activities and not really feeling anything.

You may well feel confused and uncertain. These mental effects are to be expected because of the stress or fear flight response mentioned before. The shock at this stage is often due to fear of the unknown – what is going to happen which can be linked to lack of information. So, getting reliable information is important to help you make sense of the situation at this initial stage.

After the initial shock has passed it is common then to experience denial.

Feelings that you might hear, or experience include:

- How good things were in the past
- They don't really mean it
- It can't happen here
- Numbness
- Carrying on as usual attitude
- Trivialising change.

### Talk about the change

People often say – “What's the point in talking about things, talking changes nothing”. However, this is untrue.

Making thoughts and feeling conscious by talking or writing helps provide connections and meaning. By talking about things, we are reminded about how we may have coped in the past and that gives some ideas about ways of coping in the present. It provides ways of dealing with the current situation by giving a sense of perspective. By not talking, issues remain unresolved. The importance of talking will be repeated in the guide.

## Stage 2 - Anger and depression

The initial shock stage often gives way to strong emotions – anger in particular. Anger doesn't necessarily mean that you will hit out physically, but it can cloud your thinking in a negative way. Anger can affect all aspects of your life - not just work – so it is important to recognise and deal with it.

You may well want to find a scapegoat, in the shape of the organisation, group or individual. Focusing the blame on someone or something allows the continuation of the denial by providing another focus for fears and anxieties the change is causing. You may well also find yourself feeling:

- suspicious
- sceptical, and
- frustrated.

Other feelings that you might have include:

- Loss and hurt
- Stubbornness
- Complaining
- Getting sick
- Doubting your ability.

You may also experience includes a sense of injustice – that you have been singled out or betrayed, or that you are embarrassed and feel that others are judging you. These are all normal reactions to change.

**It's important that you feel reassured that you are not the only one feeling this, but others are experiencing the same types of feelings- though may not be sharing this.**

Not only may you also feel low you may also notice changes in your appetite and your sleep patterns may also have changed as well. All are to be expected because of the hormonal effects produced by the stress or fear –flight response. So, try and focus on eating regular small meals, do some exercise – even walking will help as it triggers the release of endorphins in the brain which are our own bodies mood enhancers.

Remember too to go out and do some fun activities with family and friends as well.

### Stage 3 – Coming to terms

After the darker emotions that you may have experienced you will find that your focus will likely start to shift from what you've lost and toward what's new. This process may be slow, and you might be reluctant to acknowledge it – but it's an essential part of coping with change.

You will find that you are now accepting that change is inevitable. It's at this point making a commitment to move on is key. But remember – coming to terms with change is a gradual process.

It's vital that you don't pretend that everything now is OK – it's not. So, if you do find yourself turning back to anger and low mood – give yourself time. Seek support from friends and relatives, also speaking to someone from the EAP or your GP may also help.

Things you might experience as you come to terms with change

- What's going to happen to me
- Seeing possibilities
- Chaos
- Indecisiveness
- Unfocused work
- Energy
- Exploring alternatives
- Learning new skills.

As you can see these feelings are now moving to more positive thoughts which is what would be expected now before moving onto the final stage of the change cycle and that is acceptance and moving on.

## Stage 4 – Acceptance

Acknowledging what has been lost is an important step in acceptance as is the next part and that of moving on. This is the stage when you come to fully accept your changed circumstances.

Acceptance doesn't necessarily mean entirely giving up on your former situation – you'll have valuable memories, skills, and relationships to carry forwards - but the point is that you are moving on. What this moving on step looks like does vary from person to person – but what it will involve is the decision to let go of your grief, anger, and denial.

You will know you are in the acceptance stage when you start setting goals again.

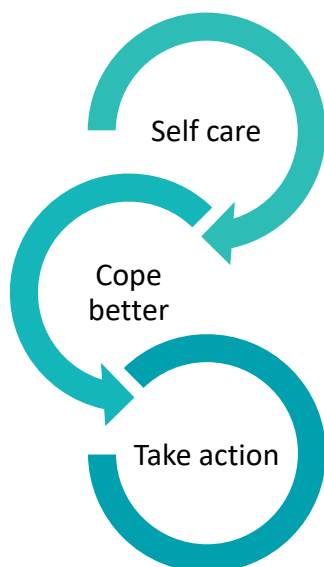
Things you might notice include:

- Where am I headed
- Focus
- Vision
- Cooperation
- Balance.

Change comes in many forms but leaving behind what we know and are used to is always stressful but can be managed.

Change can be difficult  
but can be managed

Don't get stuck  
Reach out for help and  
assistance



**When you are dealing with change there are 3 key areas that can help you get through change – self-care (looking after yourself), using tips and techniques to cope better and taking action.**

## Self-Care – see [Work-life Balance Guide](#) for more information

### 1. Eat well

It's always good to remember to eat well by having breakfast, cutting down on caffeine drinks and getting your 5 a day of fruit and vegetables, and it's never more important than when you are dealing with change. There is increasing evidence that there is an impact on our mental health because of what we eat – it's already been noted that those on a Mediterranean type of diet have better mental health, while a study on those with depression has now also showed the positive benefit of bananas!

Bananas contain tryptophan, a type of protein that the body converts into serotonin which is known to help you to relax, improve your mood and cause you to feel happier. Other important food chemicals that can improve your mood are selenium which are found in Brazil nuts and folate which is found in green leafy vegetables.



### 2. Sleep well

Good sleep is essential but is often the first thing to go when you become stressed – this unfortunately can lead you to feeling more stressed, so some simple actions may help to manage this.

Your bedroom should be a calm place – so no TV's, computer consoles etc. Keep it as dark as possible with blackout blinds, if necessary, block out noise with earplugs.

Avoid naps during the day, cut down on your coffee intake and try to be physically active.

Having a bedtime routine is key – it's how we manage babies –having a routine and it's something that we can apply to ourselves and be just as effective. Have a warm bath or shower, avoid heavy meals at least 2 hours before going to bed and alcohol for at least 3 hours. Also switch the tv off at least ½ an hour before going to bed. Allow your body to start to relax. Also set an alarm to avoid any slept in panic. Surprisingly having a regular wake up time is more important than a regular bedtime and finally avoid clock watching – turn the clock face away from you!

If you can't get off to sleep – go to a different room and do something that's not mentally challenging, have a warm milky drink, try a relaxation exercise which I'll speak about later.

Worries and concerns can disrupt sleep so try and focus on them solely in the daytime – this can be easier said than done - however it is known that by writing them down before you go to sleep can also help put them out of your head as well.

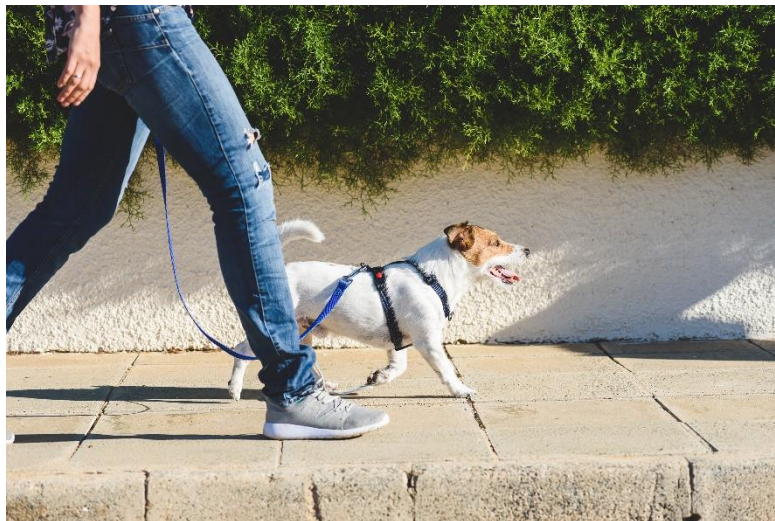




### 3. Be active

Being active not only has benefits for your mental health but also your physical health reducing the risk of heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Simple things can all make a difference – go for a stroll in the evening, get out with the kids, leave the car, get off the bus a couple of stops early, get out at lunchtime, take the stairs

You don't need to join a gym – 30 minutes a day for 5 days a week is what is recommended, and this also doesn't have to be in one go either – you can break into 10-minute lots – so you can do this to fit around your lifestyle. Exercising is known to stimulate the production of endorphins in the brain which are the body's natural opiates which help both elevate mood and relieve stress – and it's not just exercise that will do this. Endorphin release is also stimulated by listening to music, sniffing lavender, or eating vanilla and spicy food.



### 4. Avoid harmful behaviours

Drinking and drinking in excess makes dealing with change worse as it disrupts sleep leaving you feeling tired and irritable and having a hangover the next day making concentration harder and even simple tasks more difficult. Alcohol is a known mood depressant which makes feelings of anxiety and depression worse, even knowing you are drinking too much can cause stress. Sticking to the recommended limits of alcohol intake of 14 units per week for both men and women is advised to minimise the side effects the alcohol can cause.

Dealing with change is also known to make it harder for smokers to quit. Nicotine is often used as a way of self-medicating. However, the emotions that change can produce do not disappear.

Nicotine is a psychoactive (mood altering) drug. Tobacco use seems to make the subjective effects of stress from change (such as feelings of frustration, anger, and anxiety) less severe. This is because the nicotine in cigarettes reaches the brain in only 10 seconds, releasing a chemical called dopamine.

Dopamine causes an initial sense of calm and well-being and causes your body to crave that sensation again and again. However, this is a cruel illusion; while one may feel an initial sense of calm when you smoke, the body is under a great deal of increased stress. Blood pressure and heart rate increase, muscles become tense, blood vessels constrict, and less oxygen is available to the brain and body to facilitate healthy coping.

Relying on drink or drugs to cope is not dealing with the problem and results in unhealthy coping techniques should you experience similar events in the future. Learning more positive ways of coping such as being more active, learning to relax, getting involved with others are all better ways to cope.

However, help is available should you decide to quite – speak to your health care professional or pharmacist who can help advise.

#### 5. Learn to take time out

If you don't already do this – learn to take time out. It can assist when dealing with heightened emotions which you can experience when dealing with change. Fit time into your day to help you unwind – what that means is different for everyone. It could be listening to music or running, reading, practicing yoga – but become disciplined in making this time for you. Even 10 minutes of downtime can help you manage change better. The more pauses you can build into your day the calmer you'll feel.

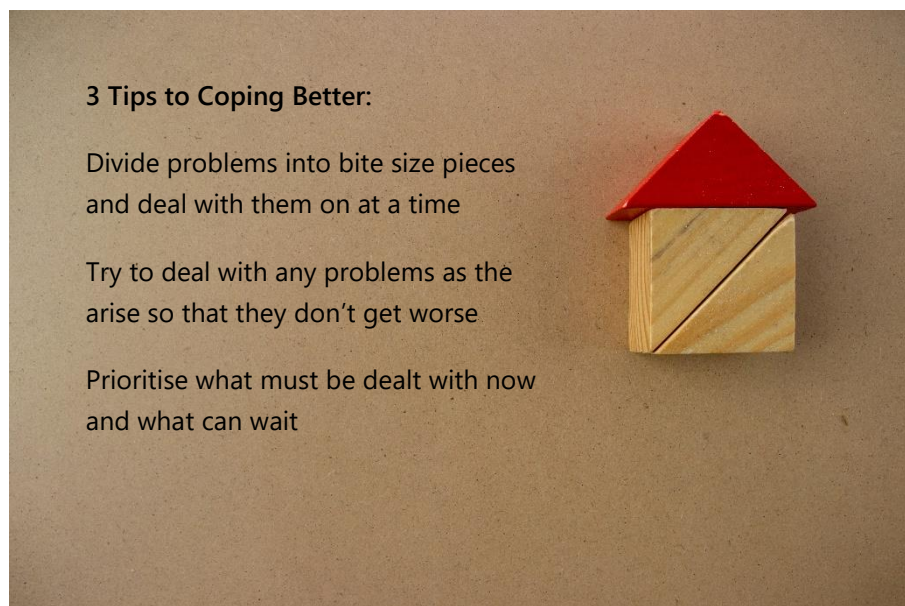
#### 6. Think positively

It's also not just what we do physically that can help with managing change. Making emotional changes are part of this too. We are all good at telling ourselves that we can't do something before we even try – but by becoming more positive can change this behaviour and lead to dealing with stressful situations such as change better.

**Numerous studies have shown that positive people are also less likely to be stressed.**

Learning to be optimistic and thinking rationally are one key method – avoid the “things are always wrong” or “I never get it right” phrases. There are lots of reasons why things go wrong – if you are going to be critical be specific as possible in your remarks – then you'll be able to see better that the words “always” and “I” are incorrect. Another thing that you can do is drop the label – classing yourself as a victim, unsporting or thick is unhelpful and limits what you can and will do.

### Cope better



Everyone faces changes and difficult situations in their lives. But these can often be outside of our control, so you may have to learn to accept that you can't necessarily change the situation. What we do need to do is learn to manage the situation as well as possible.

When you become stressed because of changes it can sometimes make the situation seem worse than it is – but there are steps you can take to deal with these problems.

Stress can make us think irrationally – if you are worrying all the time – you start to expect the worse and become more pessimistic – you may also blow things out of proportion. This all makes it more difficult to do something positive to deal with problems.

If this is happening to you – then stop and think about these 3 things:

- What's the worst that could happen?
- What if someone else I know was in my shoes – what would they do?
- Are my thoughts based on real facts? Is there another way to think about things?

Being positive can be hard when you are in the middle of a difficult situation – but trying to sort fact from fiction can help – it might help you think more clearly and cut worries down to size.

**So always ask questions about any changes – knowing the facts and being clear about them helps considerably in how you deal with them.**

#### Remember to talk

It can be hard to sometimes talk about difficult problems that result from change, it can feel embarrassing to speak about them however you can always talk about your feelings to the change such as I feel exhausted all the time, or I am angry all the time.

Sometimes knowing who to talk to can be tricky if it is family or friend who are part of the problem – but if you have a close friend that you can confide in, and trust then speak to them as soon as possible. Sometimes if you feel that speaking to a professional might be better – then speak to your GP or you could use of EAP or other help lines.

**If you think that you will have trouble saying what's on your mind – then write it down on a piece of paper first – sometimes this can be enough to shrink your problems down to size.**

And remember.....

It's easy to keep saying yes – especially to family and friends but you can't do everything and look after yourself when you are dealing with changes so be realistic about how much spare time and energy you have – learn to say no.

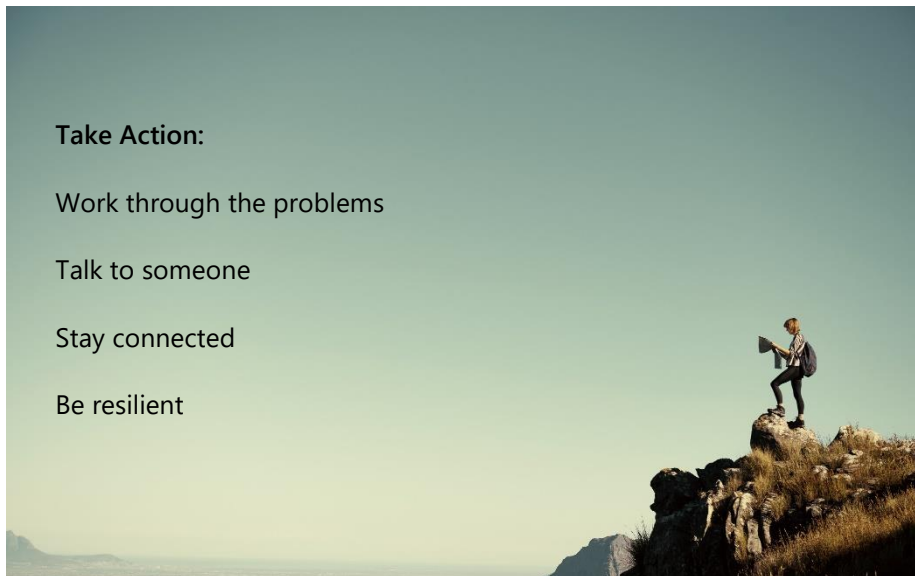
If you know you have difficult times coming up ahead – such as moving to a new house or there are to be changes at work – then arrange help if you can, see what responsibilities you can offload or put off. Pay extra attention to looking after yourself and step up the physical activity and relaxation to help you cope better.

#### **Take action**

Being able to cope with change is sometimes called resilience. Though your environment and genes might influence your level of resilience, the amount isn't set in stone. Practicing different ways of thinking and being in the world can boost your ability to deal with change and help you create a life that is adaptive to new places and unexpected events.

**Resilient people set their sights on what they can control and is an important skill when dealing with change.**

In times of change, it's easy for your mind to cut corners. 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 resilience. If you're not sure how to slow down your 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.



**Take Action:**

Work through the problems

Talk to someone

Stay connected

Be resilient

**Breathe better**

Better breathing techniques can be learned. Breathing better will help your mind and body regain control of the situation.

Practice these tips to help you take a moment and breathe:

- sit in a comfortable and supportive chair
- put one hand on your chest and the other hand on your abdomen
- breathe as you would normally, but notice where your breath is coming from in your body
- concentrate on taking a deep breath - notice how your abdomen rises and falls
- as you get used to taking deep breaths try holding the breath for a count of 4 and then exhaling to a count of 6 - this will encourage you to take deeper breaths
- when taking a deep breath, it's important to focus on the exhale
- as you get better at taking deep breaths, try working towards exhaling for 9 seconds and inhaling for 7

Remember - you can also generate more positive thoughts if you take the time to remind yourself about transitions and challenges you have successfully navigated in the past. Make a list of ways you've been resilient in your life and consider what traits and actions might be able to see you through the current challenge. By focusing on your strengths instead of your weaknesses, you will feel more able to deal with what lies ahead.

Other things you can do:

Get the information that you need – if changes are happening in the workplace make it your business to be more proactive in finding out what the changes involve. Ask constructive questions to find meaningful information to help you understand better.

Don't have your identity eggs in the work basket – of course work is important, but research has shown that the single most important factor in determining individual happiness is not about work but individual connections and having an activity that you are passionate about.

Come up with a plan and set some new goals – this could be as simple as making a list of things that you need to do then prioritising the items on the list. Other things you can do is think about the skills and life experiences that you have that can help you deal with change. Learning a new skill also helps improve resilience.

Be flexible and embracing of change – instead of hiding from change and creating a barrier be open and flexible to new challenges and tasks. Approach change with an open attitude even if you don't like something new. It can be a challenge – but you can manage it.

Accept help - Coping with change can be demanding. We all can get tired and overwhelmed at times trying to deal with change. If this occurs – seek help early, whether it is speaking to family or friends, using local support organisations or your GP, family physician or internist.

**Early intervention can prevent the development of more serious issues and help you manage the change better.**