



Gentle Path
COUNSELLING SERVICES
For the seasons of our lives

CHANGE

by Harold C. Stevens, RSW

If you were approached one day by God and asked the proverbial question, "Is there anything about you that you would like me to change for you?" What would you say? Most of us would not be stuck for an answer and many would rattle off a list of dissatisfactions faster than the automatic fire of a machine gun. Of course, some would say, "I'm fine, but my spouse could really use your services!"

Our level of the understanding of change, seems to be reflected in the adages and sayings used by society that have been around for a long time: "A change is as good as a rest", "The more things change the more they stay the same", "Change is inevitable", "Change for the sake of change..." Generally, these are often confusing and conflicting over the long haul, and are designed to respond to the need of the moment. They are situational motivators and can assist us in difficult and stressful times. On any given day, we can probably find one to fit our needs and justify our behaviour, particularly if we are up to 'no good'.

The one that makes perfect sense to me and the one I think we need to be aware of is, "Change is synonymous with stress." It doesn't matter if the change is positive or negative, the adjustment required to adapt to the change is the source of the stress, and our perception of the situation determines the length of the adjustment.

Having accepted a position in Fredericton approximately 2 years ago, leaving my family in Saint John and travelling to and fro, more often than not has been a stressful experience for me and for my family. Adjusting to the challenge of this change in our lifestyle, is where the real stress stems from. I want to be with my family and play with my one-year old grandson, the apple of my eye. I miss my wife and sometimes find myself looking forward to the family squabbles that two years ago, I couldn't stand. In fact whenever we have to make an adjustment, emotional, as in a relationship, physical, as in a diet or moving to a different location, or mental, as in assuming additional work responsibilities, or returning to school, we will experience stress. Sometimes this stress actually helps us to adjust to the new situation, but persistent and chronic stress can lead to problems over time.

When a person has lived a life of episodic chaos in a difficult family and/or within relationships, and finally becomes aware of the dysfunction associated with this lack of balance, recovery will involve change. Many of us only become aware of the need to change when there has been a life altering experience such as a serious illness or we enter counselling because someone wants us to. Healing will be painful before it feels better. It's like putting iodine on that open cut, it hurts like the dickens, but it feels so good when the wound has been cleansed and the healing begins.

We sometimes have a tendency to become disillusioned with the therapeutic process, because as we recover from the intensity of the pain, the adjustment periods weigh more than we think we can bear. For a number of us, we collapse under the strain, become depressed, or give up and choose to remain in the stress-ridden circumstances. Yes, that's right, for many different reasons, we choose to stay in the grip of stress, "Better the devil you know..." "I can't go through with this...people will think I've failed", "Men aren't supposed to cry.." and "this hurts like hell", "It's a woman's job to make this relationship work"..."And it must be done perfectly if I am to be successful in my mastery of this situation." No it doesn't!

Recovery is change and change is synonymous with stress, that's why recovery is so difficult at times. We lose what little stability we thought we had before deciding to accept the process and 'kiss the monster on the nose.' But you know, it really is only one piece of the process, significant though it is this part that makes the journey 'unfold as it should.' Remember if it were that easy, everyone would do it and the rewards would not feel so wonderful as when an insight was gained or the first time you said 'no.'

Some periods of stress seem so much easier to cope with than other times. Why is that, and how can we minimize the adjustment required to make life work? Perhaps if we put change on a continuum and seek to accept balance as the goal as opposed to moving into the extreme of doing everything right all the time, the adjustment would not be so stressful. Perhaps if we attempt to keep things simple and don't anticipate a flood when we see a drop of rain, or suspect major surgery when the Doctor refers us to a Specialist, life would be easier to manage. With practice, change can actually be fun when we approach it not as an extreme, but as continuous moderation and a better place to be.

If God approaches me one day and asks me that proverbial question, "Is there anything about you that you would like me to change for you?" I want to be able to say:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can, And the wisdom to know the difference."

Let me conclude by suggesting we need to focus on changing the thoughts that lead us to troubled waters, accept responsibility for the part we play in creating stress, and find ways to keep life as simple as it need be. As it was told to me many years ago, I leave to you now:

"Only you alone can be well, but you can never be well alone."

Gentle Path offers individual counselling for transitions and stress management. Call today for more information or a confidential appointment:

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