

Understanding Life Transitions

I wanted to share with readers the outcomes of a research project I have been involved with. It was funded by a three-year nationally competitive discovery grant (2003-2005) from the Australian Research Council (ARC [DP 0346092]). This was a collaborative project between the Research Unit, Royal District Nursing Services, South Australia and University of South Australia, School of Nursing and Midwifery.

The aim of the research was to explicate transition; we wanted to learn more about how people are able to transform their chronic illness experiences. We researched with men and women with adult onset chronic illness for two years and collected data using regular (often daily) group email conversations. Community health workers often play an important support role when people are confronted with difficult and disruptive life situations such as illness. How people can come to terms with difficult situations and “move on” is very important to understand.

Transition encompasses people’s responses during a passage of change. What we learnt was that when transition is experienced, people look for ways to move through the existing turmoil to create some order in their lives by re-orienting themselves to new situations. When going into a period of transition people are challenged to consider who they are—what they value, what they want and where they go is often not known until they give it a go; just do it. Transition really is a process of discovery. It is also the fertile soil in which we can plant the seeds of our new future.

When people move further through the transition process, sometimes their old life no longer makes sense and they no longer find satisfaction in the things they once thought were important. They often need to let go of their familiar past. This means they are often faced with uncertainty and discontinuity.

As a result of our research we have developed a process of transition. Following an event in our lives, such as the diagnosis of a life-changing illness, the process of transition is experienced by four interrelated phases as we learn to adapt to a new way of living:

- Familiar life
- The ending
- Limbo
- Becoming Ordinary

Let’s take a closer look at what we learnt from participants about each of these phases.

Familiar life

Life is recognisable and there is certainty in everyday experiences. The ordinary is captured in the daily routines and repetitions of daily living. We know what to expect, even if that is not desirable. In our familiar lives we know our social roles of parent, partner, brother, sister, grandparent etc. Our sense of self is attached to those roles and the status they do, or do not, carry. We feel a sense of order and we feel comfortable. We believe we can rely on our bodies to do as expected. The “familiar life” is what we can take for granted.

The ending

Every transition commences with an ending; an ending to our familiar lives. The impact of a long-term illness may cause an ending to our familiar lives, because we need to find new ways of living where illness can have a place. There are new routines, new

physical sensations that impact on how we live, treatments and appointments. We may feel disrupted, frightened, anxious or even angry that we have to experience this. We may feel that someone, even ourselves, is to blame for us having to go through this very difficult period. We may place blame, we may feel resentful, we feel overwhelmed and ask Why me? Why now? Why this? We feel we are not in control and this is frightening.

In limbo

We can move into a state that is neither in the past or the future. During this time, the sense of “being different” can be overwhelming. We may feel victimised, and become hypersensitive to what is happening around us, and powerless about our capacity to live in such a changed environment. When in limbo we may dwell within and can feel very isolated and alone. We may think no-one can understand our experiences and may not even have words to explain our feelings. It is a time of self-absorption because the task of that moment is how to reclaim self in the midst of change. Some of us may withdraw to do some self-examination and may be dismissive of others or reject offers of assistance.

Becoming ordinary

Over time the disruption slowly passes and the process of re-integration emerges, bringing with it a sense of increased capacities and new perspectives. We have a sense of our lives “becoming ordinary” again. We may feel that there is less need to “be in control”. We become more open to learning from life, taking action on issues that confront us and less likely to see the world as working against us.

As a consequence of the research, we have, with participants, developed a series of 11 booklets for people who are learning to live with illness. These booklets can be downloaded from the Internet for free: http://www.rdns.org.au/research_unit/research_projects_current.htm#Describing

*Kay Price
School of Nursing and Midwifery
University of South Australia
GPO Box 2471
Adelaide South Australia 5001
AUSTRALIA
Email: kay.price@unisa.edu.au*