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HOW TO USE THE 3 R'S OF

Strategies for Coping with Change



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Strategies for Coping with Change

How to Stay Calm When Everything Hits the Fan



By Patricia Haddock

Change happens.

Sometimes suddenly. Sometimes slowly.

Some changes can fling your life into chaos, leave you floundering in indecision, spark anger, or bury you in fear.

Your stress hormones go off like a rocket. The ancient fight-or-flight response overwhelms you and shuts down your ability to think. The amygdala sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus, triggering a cascade of hormonal changes that flood the body. If left unchecked, panic, anxiety, increased blood pressure, and a bunch of other negative physical and mental responses can begin to overwhelm you.

Change pushes us out of our comfort zone and into strange, new territory. There is no escape.

We may go boldly or go kicking and screaming.

Either way, we will go through the change because the only way out is through.

“Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don’t resist them; that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.”

Lao Tzu

Strengthen Your Resilience

Your ability to cope with change is a measure of your resilience. The good news: Resilience is like a muscle. You can strengthen it.

In the late 1970s, Susan Kobasa, Ph.D., researched coping skills and stress. She concluded that three main elements contribute to resilience: challenge, commitment, and control.

Challenge

Challenge is the ability to see change as an opportunity for growth and development. This is a characteristic of people who have a growth mindset as defined by Carol Dweck, Ph.D. They view events as temporary rather than permanent.

Commitment

Resilient people are committed to their work and life priorities and goals. This commitment motivates them to keep moving forward regardless of what’s in front of them. Change is merely something to move past. They view the future positively.

Control

When you are resilient, you identify what you can control and focus on that instead of what you can’t control. This makes you more resourceful and gives you more flexibility in handling change. In times of uncertainty and fear, focus on what you can control.

What can you control?

Take a few minutes and think about what you can control in your life right now. If you can’t come up with something, think smaller. You probably control what you eat for your next meal, or what music you listen to, or videos you watch. The more you identify what you can control, the more control and calm you feel.

Complete this statement: I may not be able to control the situation, but I can control:

Engage Your Analytical Brain, Make a List, and Start to Gain Control

You're most likely crazed with everything you have to do and are making all types of adjustments in your life and work. Your brain is spinning out of control. The key is to create order from the chaos by starting with a simple list.

According to Carrie Barron, M.D., Director of the Creativity for Resilience Program at Dell Medical School in Austin, Texas, lists are a way of working through confusion. They help you prioritize, separate what's important from what's not important, and show the steps you need to take. They relieve the pressure.

If you're like most people, you will feel better just by getting everything out of your head and putting it in paper.

1. Take out paper and pen or bring up a Word document and list everything that you need to address.
2. Once you have your list, prioritize it. The easiest way to prioritize when confronted with a lengthy list of things is the paired comparison method.

Use Paired Comparison for Easy Prioritization

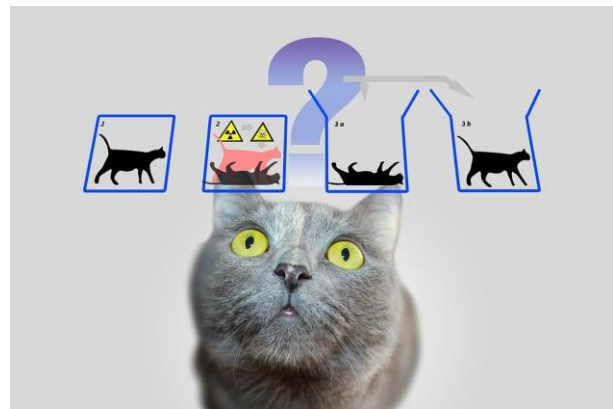
Give each item on your list a letter of the alphabet, then compare them in pairs. A or B? You decide B. B or C. Still B. B or D. D is more important. Compare D to each item on the list. The item that is the last to be chosen is the most important task, and it becomes No.1 on your list of priorities.

Start over with the process until you have compared every item. Your final list shows your priorities from most important to least important.

- Study your final list of priorities. Put an asterisk next to anything that you — and only you — must do.
- Say no to activities that you don't want to do or can't do.
- Ask for help if you need it and have family and friends pitch in at home.

Schrödinger's Famous Cat and Change

I first learned about Schrödinger's cat in high school physics. Physicist Erwin Schrödinger proposed a thought experiment in the 1930s in response to another physicist's theories. (You don't need to know a lot of physics to follow this. Trust me.)



A hypothetical cat is placed in a box with a vial of poison. The box is sealed. The vial may open at some time and kill the cat. However, as long as the box is sealed, you have no way of knowing if the cat is alive or dead, so you can think of the cat as both alive and dead at the same time.

What does the cat in the box have to do with change?

When you are confronted with change, you have no way of knowing what's on the other side without navigating the change. The cat is in the box.

The change could result in something good — kitty is alive — or something bad — poor kitty.

Your attitude about the nature of the change determines your feelings, your mood, and your behavior, which are either resourceful or not. The choice is yours.

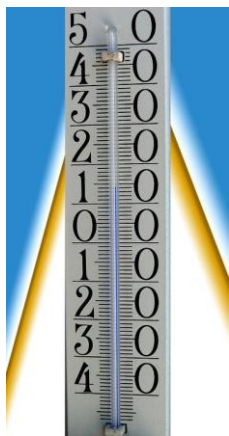
If you assume the change will be bad, you will be worried, frustrated, angry, afraid — a whole boatload of negative feelings. Your mood sinks, and your behavior follows. You have fewer resources for navigating the change process.

The solution is to take no position. Assuming either way--good or bad--is an exercise in futility. The outcome is in the future. All you can do is manage your thoughts, reactions, and mood moment by moment.

Quick Ways to Improve Your Mood

1. Check out the [laughing baby video](#) when you need a quick, positive pick-me-up.
2. Try the [loving-kindness meditation by Emma Seppala](#) sometime today.
3. Note your mood before and after.

Monitor Your Mood



Larry Senn introduced the concept of the mood elevator in his book *The Mood Elevator*.

The mood elevator resembles a temperature gauge. Positive feelings and moods are above the midline; negative feelings are below. The midline is neutral. Senn calls this a mood of curiosity. This would be zero on the thermometer

If your feelings and mood are below zero when confronted with a change, the goal is to move up the scale to at least zero. At zero, you are open and curious, but judgement-free. If you can't move into curiosity, you can move up slightly. There's a big difference between anger and irritation.

What if you just can't find anything good about a change? Often changes that come from loss or painful events fall into this category. There's nothing good about them. They blindside you and knock you out cold. There are no good feelings and nothing can improve your mood.

What do you do?

First you grieve the loss and feel what you feel, in whatever way works for you for however long it takes. At some point, you start healing, and one day you are able to pick yourself up and start moving. Then you can begin to use the mood thermometer to find your way up again.

Stop Chewing Your Thoughts like a Hungry Cow

Cows are ruminants; they gain nourishment by chewing their cud over and over and over. Rumination is good for cows; not so much for people. In people, it is the thief of calm because it is repetitiously thinking about something and attaching negative feelings to it. You imagine worse-case scenarios in bloody detail, what-if movies play in an endless loop, and any hope of calm is lost. It's like picking at a sore over and over. It never heals. This leads to more panic, anxiety, helplessness, and stress with a continual release of stress hormones.



As mentioned earlier, when change happens, a soup of neurochemicals is released into your body. However, they remain in your body for only 90 seconds and then are flushed out. Your emotions and your mood settle down.

Then how can you stay in a bad mood for hours or days? What's going on?

According to Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroanatomist, in her book, [My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey](#), you keep feeding the bad mood with your thoughts and create a continuous, negative mood loop. This means that after the initial surge, you can stop a bad mood from continuing. That's the good news. The bad news is that you can do it only if you stop thinking about it.

Rumination can occur even without your being aware of it. When your stress elevates, when negative emotions start taking over, you could be unconsciously ruminating. The solution is using your mood to focus your attention on your thoughts.

How to Stop Rumination

1. If you discover that you are ruminating, stop the monologue and the endless loop. Become present and mindful. Answer each question slowly and thoroughly.
 - a. Where are you?
 - b. What do you see?
 - c. What can you hear?
 - d. What can you feel?

2. Look at your list of priorities and settle into one task. Use the Pomodoro technique to focus on that one task for 25 minutes without interruption. Take a 5-minute break and then do another 25 minutes of intense focus. The greater your focus on a specific task, the more you eliminate excessive rumination.

Tap into Your Support System

Connecting with others is a key factor in handling change. Even if you can meet in person, you still can stay connected. Email, social media, and video meeting apps can't completely replace in-person contact, but just seeing and hearing someone you care about can improve your outlook and spirit.

No one walks through life without needing help from time to time. You especially need help when the going gets rough. Stay in touch with family and friends even if you are far away. People evolved as social animals and need a tribe to feel safe.

Who's Your Tribe?

Who can you ask for help?

Who can help you see things objectively?

Who has resources that you can use?

Whom do you trust to share your emotions with?

Who can cushion the blow, support you, and not judge you?

Who is always there for you when you need them?

Reaching out to your tribe can help you feel grounded and safe. You may discover that they have faced what you are facing and can give you sound advice based on experience.

“My barn having burnt down, I can now see the moon.” Mizuta Masahide, 17th century Japanese poet and samurai

Build Your Resilience Muscle

A day will come when your life will return to a routine, and you can move forward. Things might be different from the way things were--in fact, they probably will be different.

More change is coming. The key is to build resilience, so you can weather it.



In 1955, psychologists Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith began a landmark study that followed children born on Kauai, HI, that year to age 40. The research revealed several common factors that made the difference between their ability to face life with resilience or not. The findings provide a strategy for strengthening your resilience muscle.

1. Learn how to become a better problem solver, so you can face change with more confidence and resources.
2. Build and strengthen emotional support systems and interpersonal relationships.
3. Know that you have control over your responses.
4. Learn from past experience to help you be more resourceful and self-confident in the future.
5. Maintain good social networks and can call on others for information and support.
6. Cultivate emotional intelligence and empathy to better manage your emotions and your actions and their effects on others.

“Don’t judge me by my success, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.” Nelson Mandela

Quick Tips

1. **Manage your stress.** Any change — good and bad — is stressful, and self-care is critical. Get enough sleep, exercise, eat well, stay hydrated, meditate, and take care of yourself. You need to reinforce your mental, spiritual, and physical resources as much as possible.
2. **Listen to your self-talk.** If you find yourself being pessimistic, engaging in negative messaging, or falling into all-or-nothing thinking, stop and regroup. Remember, if you don’t know the outcome, you want to remain curious about it, not judgmental. How you speak to yourself affects how you feel about a situation, a person, and yourself. The more negative your self-talk, the more you undermine your coping ability and self-confidence.
3. **Avoid assuming the worst.** Your brain will want to send you down the-worst-thing-that-can-happen path. Refuse to go there. It’s a dead-end. Focus on what you can control.
4. **Get help.** When change seems insurmountable, you can’t navigate it alone. This is when family and friends can come to the rescue. Rely on them to support you. Sometimes professional help may be needed for you to move into a more resourceful state.
5. **Just breathe.** If you can’t do anything else, if you are locked in loss, just breathe and pay attention to your breathing. Don’t give into thinking, let go of self-talk. Just breathe until you feel more in control. Try it. It works.

[How to Improve Your Self-Confidence](#)

Self-confident people have a can-do attitude that helps others see them as competent, capable professionals. They believe that they can meet and overcome obstacles and are willing to face challenges. The right amount of self-confidence is necessary if you want to succeed in your chosen profession or business.

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