

Changes Mean Endings and New Beginnings

2009 already has been a year of major change in many people's personal and work lives. Jobs have been lost, loved ones have been lost and families' financial situations have changed.

Sometimes the things we have always depended upon to be true no longer are — and that's hard to accept. When major changes occur in our lives it's common to experience strong emotions and inner turmoil.

Change often involves events we can't control. But we can control how we deal with our emotions, thoughts, attitude and other effects of major changes.

Author William Bridges identified three phases of a transition, a process people go through to cope with major change. The first phase is endings, which includes letting go of what was. Letting go isn't easy and often involves the grief process. Every change begins with an ending, the loss of something that was. Being able to acknowledge that things are no longer the same as what they were before the change is essential to coping with that sense of loss.

The second phase Bridges calls the wilderness period. This is the time between the old and the new.

We need to spend time thinking through what has ended and eventually come to terms with it and accept it.

Sue Vineyard, author of "How to Take Care of You," writes, "We need to take a step backward and simply click our mind into neutral gear as we gather perspective, say goodbye to what was and strengthen ourselves peacefully to handle the confusion and subsequent new beginnings that are demanded by change."

Author William Bridges' third phase, the new beginning, is a time when people start to move forward.

We reach the new beginning only after we have dealt with what has ended and spent the necessary time in the wilderness.

Understanding the transition process can help people deal with their reactions to a difficult change, the ISU Extension specialist added. "It also explains why we may not feel good even when we have made the best possible decision."

People get stuck at one of the transition phases if the "letting go" has not yet occurred. It might be time to discuss your feelings with an understanding person. Professional counseling can help people cope with feelings of loss.

Stress counselors are available through the Iowa Concern Hotline at 1-800-447-1985, providing 24-hour confidential assistance. Or visit www.extension.iastate.edu/iowaconcern.