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OREGON ATTORNEY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

SEEING THE POSITIVE IN CHANGE

The adage that “nothing escapes change” has never been truer. Social, economic, political, and technological changes continue to affect our personal and collective destinies. Change seems to be happening faster, but coping with it has not suddenly become easier. Individuals struggle to deal with job losses, workplace reorganizations, shifting expectations, and family problems such as alcoholism.

Change can be destabilizing, whether it’s out of the blue or desired. For example, being promoted at work and getting married may be welcome events – yet they also rate high on the stress scale. Research has found that winning a lottery produces the same amount of stress as experiencing a major trauma. “Nonevents” and disappointments, such as not getting an expected promotion, also create stress by altering our hopes and expectations for our lives.

Ultimately, change can feel scary because it forces us to recognize that we aren’t in control of life’s variables. “Once our life is disrupted, we go through a period of what I call ‘betwixt and between,’” said Nancy K. Schlossberg, author of *Overwhelmed: Coping With Life’s Ups and Downs*. “We don’t know exactly who we are and what our new routines are, and we haven’t established a new set of relationships. It takes a while to figure out where you fit and how things are going.”

The immediate responses to sudden change can be confusion, anxiety, and

depression. Yet the impact of change depends, to a great extent, on how we perceive and interpret it. “Based on the messages we grew up with in our families, we develop an attitude about change,” said Marilyn Mason, a Minneapolis psychotherapist. “Some people love change. Others are very reluctant and resistant because some changes in childhood were so hurtful or traumatic.”

It can be devastating when assumptions about our future suddenly collapse, or we are forced to confront facts about ourselves that we had steadfastly avoided. Yet faulty assumptions and expectations are among the greatest obstacles to healthy approaches to change. Stubbornly resisting change may create further anxiety and contribute to alcohol and other drug use.

“If we have the entrenched belief that we are in control and should be in control, we are going to be shocked to our foundations any time there is even the slightest change, because we didn’t give permission for this to happen,” said Patricia Owen, a licensed psychologist and director of the Butler Center for Research at Hazelden.

People who are under stress naturally look for the quickest way to alleviate their suffering, Owen added. If they are already vulnerable to addiction, or in the early stages, they may use alcohol or other drugs to escape the stress of change. One sign of a problem is if a person justifies the use of alcohol or other drugs to cope

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with change. This is a clue that alcohol is playing an inappropriate role in a person's life.

The experts agree on several effective strategies to help us cope with change:

- **Accept and name the change.** Simply acknowledging the reality of a change and that it's stressful provides some relief.
- **Assess our resources for managing change.** Such assessment enables us to take advantage of our coping strengths and build up any weak areas. If we lack support, for example, we might join a group or reach out to friends. Healthy eating, exercise, prayer, and meditation are other tools for healthy coping.
- **Take charge of change.** Even if it's uncomfortable, choosing to see change as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth gives us the perspective needed to keep learning and growing during change.

"It's our response to the unexpected that shapes our maturity," Mason said. "Changes are opportunities for spiritual growth. When we have a crisis, it pushes us to edges we have not faced before. At that time, we can either go into denial or we can say, 'I'm going to face this, feel it, get support, and do what I can to cope.'"

Originally published in Alive & Free, a chemical health column provided by Hazelden (www.hazelden.org), a nonprofit agency that provides information and services related to addiction and recovery.