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## Life events and career change: transition psychology in practice

Dai Williams, Chartered Occupational Psychologist  
Eos Career Services, 32 Send Road, Send, Woking, Surrey GU23 7ET, UK

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This paper is offered as part a dialogue between researchers and practitioners in psychology, management and related professions. Many of us share concern for the quality of working life, healthy organisations and in particular for managing stress and change. I offer a practitioner's view of using transition psychology with individuals involved in career crisis or change, and helping them to survive and thrive in changing organisations.

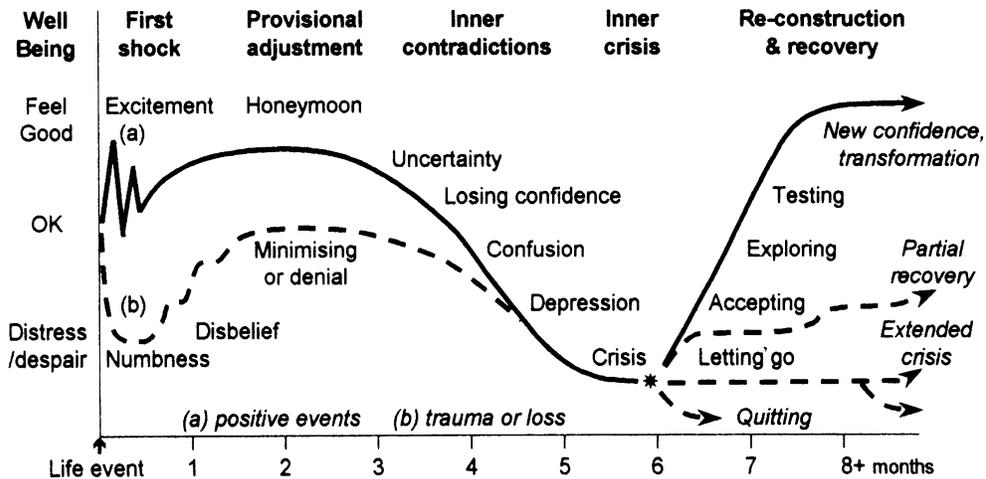
Occupational psychology is changing too, shifting emphasis from individual to organisational behaviour. Do colleagues share my concern to keep in mind the individual's experience of reality? Increasingly individuals have to forge our own career paths through a series of organisations. Work is only part of our total life experience, but one that increasingly affects our health, and the well-being of our families and communities. Transition psychology highlights vital connections across the life~work boundary. Organisation performance relies on optimum participation by real people.

Coping with stress and change have always been key issues for human survival and evolution. We know that complex psychological mechanisms evolved for coping with stress. Is it possible that equally sophisticated processes have evolved for coping with change? Current psychological research and commercial practice focus on stress, performance and organisational agendas for change. But interventions which overlook deeper psycho-social factors may impede natural transition processes.

### Transition theories

Transition psychology originated from work on bereavement, family crisis and depression by Parkes (64), Hill (65), Holmes and Rahe (67), Kubler Ross (69), Brown (68), and others. By 1970 the US Peace Corps was using it for culture shock briefings to volunteers. Hopson, Adams and Scally developed applications for career education (76, 81). Figure 1 is adapted from their work.

**Figure 1: Phases and features of the Transition Cycle, adapted from Hopson**



Transition theory formed a key aspect of life role, life-span development and life stage theories promoted by Super (76), Gergen (77), Levinson (78), and Sugarman (78, 86). Hopson and others recognised transition as a primary cause of stress. Schlossberg (81) has developed its application to counselling. Bridges (80, 88, 95), Nicholson & West (88) and others applied the concept of transition to organisation change settings, with shorter 3 and 4 stage models but describing essentially the same process. These are referred to later.

Models of transition endeavour to describe how individuals respond to change, either in their own lives or environment. There are many types of change and varying degrees of impact. Not all changes cause transitions. Most transitions are associated with significant life events - changes to the individual's role or environment that require radical restructuring of the individual's view of themselves and their world. The process takes longer than most people expect - typically 6-12 months, sometimes longer. Transitions were studied for trauma and loss. But research and practice indicate that positive life events e.g. marriage, birth of a child or new job have as much potential for psychological disruption as negative events. Transitions involve serious hazards and windows of opportunity for growth.

### **Theory and practice - the practitioner's view**

As a career counsellor my requirements for models and techniques may differ from the researchers who developed them, or from consultants offering strategic advice to employers. We share interests in well-researched models but my main concern is their utility for clients. Models and techniques must be usable in a wide variety of situations, often with ambiguous or incomplete data, and within tight time constraints. I find it important to interpret situations and data holistically - in the client's total life-work context - to make effective and meaningful interventions.

Theories and methods must have practical diagnostic value to help clients identify underlying issues and dynamics. They need to have predictive potential to identify a range of options for action, more qualitative than quantitative. Above all they must be easy for non-psychologists to use and remember. Detailed interpretation needs practice. The real life experiences of clients constantly challenge and enhance our professional insights.

### **Practical applications of transition psychology**

Leonie Sugarman's lectures in 1978 introduced me to life-span development, and transition theories. From 83-86 I used these in *culture shock briefings for international assignments* - for Shell staff and students assigned to UK and recruits assigned overseas. Transition awareness enabled us to

support rather than criticise or discipline staff during periods of crisis, with very few unsuccessful assignments. How many employers recognise this?

**Transition awareness** has been a core module of my *career counselling and outplacement programmes* since 1987. It serves four purposes:

1. To help clients in a **current career crisis** to identify underlying issues, discuss coping strategies and find new hope for recovery.
2. To review **previous education, life and career crises** which undermine current confidence e.g. under-achievement and loss.
3. To **prepare clients for future life or career changes**, including changes affecting their immediate family or colleagues.
4. To **brief employers on behalf of clients** with transition related absence, performance or relationship problems, and to develop **transition management skills** for staff and organisation changes.

### Monitoring stress and change

About 1 in 3 of my career counselling clients are coping with career crisis, severe stress or life changes. Three methods monitor potential issues:

a) A 24 item **Personal Pressures Checklist** - covering health and well-being, personal circumstances and recent life events. This provides initial screening to identify potential stress, change and referral issues.

b) The **Occupational Stress Indicator** (Cooper et al) monitors mental and physical health, sources of pressure at work and identifies specific issues for further analysis, referral or action including a stress coaching session.

c) A **Lifeline exercise** provides the focus for an **autobiographical review** (1-4 hours). Clients reflect on key events and chart their recollection of good times and periods of distress. It is used to discuss formative educational and career experiences. It also invites clients to reflect on previous work and life transitions for a briefing on coping with change. You can try a lifeline exercise for yourself on the [Eos Lifeline Chart](#) (PDF file).

### The individual's experience of transition

The lifeline review is a rich source of information about the diverse range of education, career and life events which clients have experienced. Individuals vary widely in recall, and in the significance they place on past life events. On average mid-career adults report about 10-15 major events that resulted in memorable periods of crisis or development.

In the past 11 years I used lifeline reviews with over 400 people aged from 15 to 55. Their experiences form the basis for this paper and my adapted model of the transition process shown in Figure 1. **Figure 2** illustrates a relatively normal lifeline and events often reported - Sheehy's 'predictable crises of adult life'. The low points represent possible transitions and the typical time lag between key events and subsequent distress. In normal transitions recovery follows soon after reported low points.

Figure 2: Example of a self-report lifeline charting well-being through typical life events

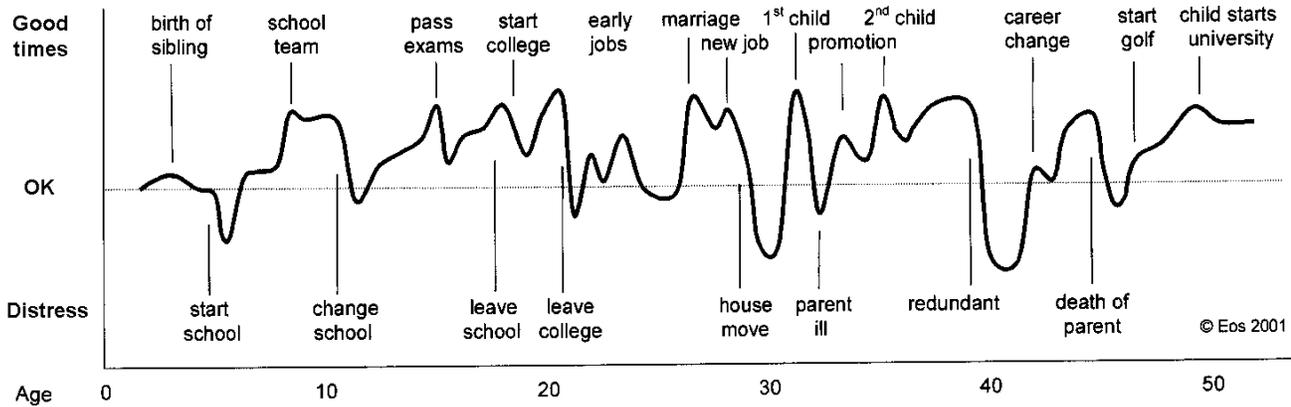
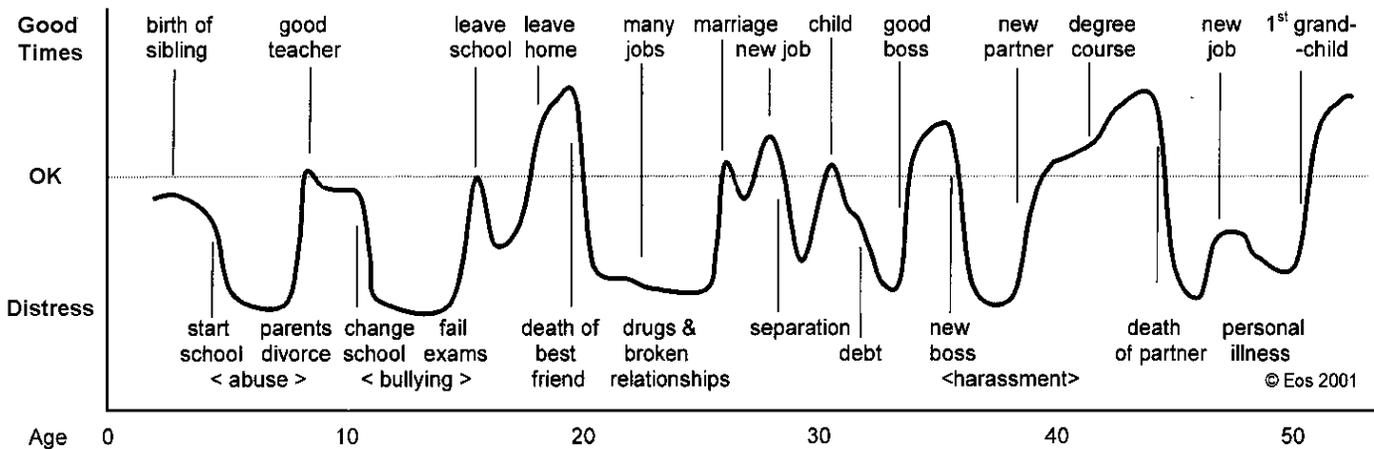


Figure 3 is a composite lifeline illustrating more traumatic experiences and the problems of failing to cope with change. These are taken from eleven cases but are typical of many more. These cases highlighted three special features of unsuccessful transitions (below) and inhibiting factors (page 5):

Figure 3: Composite lifeline illustrating traumas, unsuccessful transitions and recovery points



- Multiple transitions** can produce a cumulative deterioration in well-being if the individual is unable to recover before another change. This is a serious hazard if an individual quits (or is dismissed from) a job or life role at the low point of a transition crisis, or if they encounter an emotional trauma while learning a new work role. These may need help.
- An **extended crisis** can develop when an individual is unable to come to terms with a trauma or change. This can last for months or years.
- Sometimes a new event or **defining moment** may trigger recovery from extended crisis. This cathartic release could be a key area for research.

## Issues for transition management and support

- Individuals differ in vulnerability to transitions (see factors below).
- Transitions often reach a crisis about 6 months after change, +/- 1 month.

- They can have several outcomes depending on circumstances.
- Effects transcend the individual's life~work boundary into other roles
- They can cause transitions for others: family, friends, colleagues, and helpers.
- Change involves situational and intrapersonal learning and un-learning
- Transitions involve at least two levels of adaptation - behavioural and cognitive restructuring. These occur at different phases of the cycle.

## Enabling factors in transitions

A number of conditions appear to enable successful transitions:

- **Economic security** - surplus resources, no debt, stable income, own home, low commitments, multiple-income household
- **Emotional security** - supportive partner, stable childhood, support networks, openness on emotional and mental health issues
- **Health** - good physical fitness, prudent lifestyle, quality time for leisure.
- **Prior transition skills** - positive transition experiences, clear goals
- **Supportive work environment** - high respect / low control culture, good team morale, clear role and contract terms, life~work boundaries respected
- **Transition support** - briefing, monitoring issues, practical support, life~career planning, tolerance, dignity, valuing the past, time off before illness, confidential counselling, freedom/recognition for new ideas

**Positive outcomes:** minimise severity of distress in the crisis phase, minimise risks of quitting or extended crisis, optimising recovery time, high innovation, personal transformation, healing old wounds, 'rejuvenated' staff, high group morale and synergy, enable organisational transformation.

## Inhibiting factors in transitions

- **Economic insecurity** - low income, debt, high financial commitments, fear of job loss, temporary, ambiguous or onerous employment contract
- **Emotional insecurity** - no partner, few friends, dependent relatives, secret grief (lost lover or child), sense of guilt, unresolved issues or regrets, multiple transitions, anxiety over being diagnosed mentally ill
- **Health** - chronic or undiagnosed conditions, low fitness, fatigue, lifestyle
- **Hostile work environment** - work overload, unrealistic demands, insufficient resources, abuse of life~work boundary e.g. excessive time demands affecting relationships, leisure, fitness. Low respect/high control culture. No time off except sickness absence. Discipline for absence. Scapegoating weaker members by stressed team. Harassment or abuse by aggressive/stressed manager. Boss changes. Rigid agenda.
- **Poor transition management** - no support, no preparation for change, unrealistic time scales. No monitoring of key issues pre-crisis. No opportunity for fresh insights. Past achievements ignored or rubbished.

**Negative outcomes:** increased risk of severe crisis e.g. extended absence, quitting, breakdown, suicide. High risk of errors e.g. accidents (work, car, home), indiscretions or poor strategic decisions. Poor, broken or abusing relationships. Poor team morale, turnover. Down-grading career prospects. Frustrated recovery - rebellious staff, unused insights, dissent, conflict.

## Breaking out of transition crisis

The least understood part of transitions is how the mind reconstructs itself and adapts to a new reality. The transition cycle may be an ancient and sophisticated mechanism for the fundamental evolutionary task of coping with change. This appears to include a process of cognitive restructuring. It is initially inhibited by cognitive dissonance defences (e.g. denial). It is facilitated by valuing the past and still viable beliefs before letting go of obsolete concepts, expectations and behaviours. Construct theory may be relevant. There can be a rapid, spontaneous breakout from the crisis phase - a defining moment or catharsis that triggers this process. Once begun the restructuring or recovery process can occur within a few weeks. It liberates creativity, confidence,

optimism, a search for new meanings and a Gestalt type quest for a fully integrated view of the new reality. To see a person transforming their life in the recovery phase is like watching a flower open.

## Transition psychology: integrating theory and practice

These observations suggest several ways of integrating existing theories:

1. Hopson's model has important features for understanding personal and career transitions. It distinguishes responses to positive and negative events (honeymoon vs. denial). Recovery is a key image - a single phase.
2. Nicholson's preparation stage is important for anticipated changes, linked with aspects of Bridges' point that 'beginnings start with endings'. Briefings about the new situation and transition skills facilitate change.
3. There may be at least two levels of adaptation to change - behavioural adaptation and cognitive restructuring. These involve areas outside occupational psychology. Transitions are a developmental task with educational, clinical and counselling applications. Transition psychology needs to span all these areas to be better understood and applied.
4. The process of cognitive reconstruction can be highly disruptive to the individual's peace of mind, competence, performance and relationships. Bridges' term 'neutral phase' seems inappropriate. This is a potential crisis phase, a priority period for transition management and support.
5. Transitions transcend the individual's life~work boundary. A career crisis can have serious ramifications for family members. And personal life transitions can disrupt work performance. Transition management programmes need to take account of these interactions. Schlossberg's 4S approach (situation, support, self and strategies) is most relevant to this.

Practitioners have to work with exceptions that prove the rules. This paper and symposium are opportunities to trade observations and explanations. The approach described here has provided a powerful tool for helping individuals survive and thrive through situations which employers have given up on. In a period of rapid change the challenge is to spread transition awareness and management skills to employers and the general population.

## References

- Hopson B & Adams J (1976) **Transition - Understanding and managing personal change.**  
Sugarman L (1986) **Life Span Development**  
Bridges W (1995) **Managing Transitions**  
Schlossberg N K, Waters E B and Goodman J (1995) **Counselling Adults in Transition**

For other papers on transition psychology see the Eos website: <http://www.eoslifework.co.uk> including [Human responses to change](#) and [Transitions: managing personal and organisational change](#). To monitor your own life events to date you can use the [Eos Life-Line exercise](#) (PDF file).

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Your comments on these issues are welcome - email Dai Williams at [eosuk@btinternet.com](mailto:eosuk@btinternet.com)

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