

How to Deal With Major Life Changes

What goes on in the cocoon of change isn't always pretty, but the results can be beautiful. Martha Beck talks you through the four phases of human metamorphosis. Get ready to fly!



I used to think I knew how some caterpillars become butterflies. I assumed they weave cocoons, then sit inside growing six long legs, four wings, and so on. I figured if I were to cut open a cocoon, I'd find a butterfly-ish caterpillar, or a caterpillar-ish butterfly, depending on how far things had progressed. I was wrong. In fact, the first thing caterpillars do in their cocoons is shed their skin, leaving a soft, rubbery chrysalis. If you were to look inside the cocoon early on, you'd find nothing but a puddle of glop. But in that glop are certain cells, called *imago* cells, that contain the DNA-coded instructions for turning bug soup into a delicate, winged creature—the angel of the dead caterpillar.

If you've ever been through a major life transition, this may sound familiar. Humans do it, too—not physically but psychologically. All of us will experience metamorphosis several times during our lives, exchanging one identity for another. You've probably already changed from baby to child to adolescent to adult—these are obvious, well-recognized stages in the life cycle. But even after you're all grown up, your identity isn't fixed. You may change marital status, become a parent, switch careers, get sick, win the lottery.

Any transition serious enough to alter your definition of self will require not just small adjustments in your way of living and thinking but a full-on metamorphosis. I don't know if this is emotionally stressful for caterpillars, but for humans it can be hell on wheels. The best way to minimize trauma is to understand the process.

The Phases of Human Metamorphosis

Psychological metamorphosis has four phases. You'll go through these phases, more or less in order, after any major change catalyst (falling in love or breaking up, getting or losing a job, having children or emptying the nest, etc.). The strategies for dealing with change depend on the phase you're experiencing.

Phase 1: Dissolving

Here's the Deal

The first phase of change is the scariest, especially because we aren't taught to expect it. It's the time when we lose our identity and are left temporarily formless: person soup. Most people fight like crazy to keep their identities from dissolving. "This is just a blip," we tell ourselves when circumstances rock our world. "I'm the same person, and my life will go back to being the way it was."

Sometimes this is true. But in other cases, when real metamorphosis has begun, we run into a welter of "dissolving" experiences. We may feel that everything is falling apart, that we're losing everyone and everything. Dissolving feels like death, because it is—it's the demise of the person you've been.

What to Do

When we're dissolving we may get hysterical, fight our feelings, try to recapture our former lives, or jump immediately toward some new status quo ("rebound romance" is a classic example). All these measures actually slow down Phase One and make it more painful. The following strategies work better:

In Phase 1, Live One Day (or 10 minutes) at a Time

Instead of dwelling on hopes and fears about an unknowable future, focus your attention on whatever is happening right now.

"Cocoon" by Caring For Yourself in Physical, Immediate Ways

Wrap yourself in a blanket, make yourself a cup of hot tea, attend an exercise class, whatever feels comforting.

Talk to Others Who Have Gone Through a Metamorphosis

If you don't have a wise relative or friend, a therapist can be a source of reassurance.

Let Yourself Grieve

Even if you are leaving an unpleasant situation (a bad marriage, a job you didn't like), you'll probably go through the normal human response to any loss: the emotional roller coaster called the grieving process. You'll cycle through denial, anger, sadness, and acceptance many times. Just experiencing these feelings will help them pass more quickly.

If you think this sounds frustratingly passive, you're right. Dissolving isn't something you do; it's something that happens to you. The closest you'll come to controlling it is relaxing and trusting the process.

Phase 2: Imagining

Here's the Deal

For those of us who have just a few tiny control issues, Phase 2 is as welcome as rain after drought. This is when the part of you that knows your destiny, the *imago* in your psyche, will begin giving you instructions about how to reorganize the remnants of your old identity into something altogether different.

The word *imago* is the root of the word image. You'll know you're beginning Phase 2 when your mind's eye starts seeing images of the life you are about to create. These can't be forced—like dissolving, they happen to you—and they are never what you expected. You're becoming a new person, and you'll develop traits and interests your old self didn't have. You may feel compelled to change your hairstyle or wardrobe, or redecorate your living space. The old order simply seems wrong, and you'll begin reordering your outer situation to reflect your inner rebirth.

What to Do

Here are some ways you may want to respond when you begin spontaneously imagining the future:

Cut Out Magazine Pictures You Find Appealing or Interesting

Glue them onto a piece of butcher paper. The resulting collage will be an illustration of the life you're trying to create.

Let Yourself Daydream

Your job is to try out imaginary scenarios until you have a clear picture of your goals and desires. You'll save a lot of time, effort, and grief by giving yourself time to do this in your head before you attempt it in the real world.

Phase 2 is all about images: making them up, making them clear, making them possible. Moving through this stage, you'll start to feel an impulse to go from dreaming (imagining possibilities) to scheming (planning to bring your vision to fruition). Write down both dreams and schemes, then gather information about how you might create them.

Phase 3: Re-forming

Here's the Deal

As your dreams become schemes, you'll begin itching to make them come true. This signals Phase 3, the implementation stage of the change process. Phase 3 is when you stop fantasizing about selling your art and start submitting work to galleries, or go beyond ogling a friend's

brother to having her set you up on a date. You'll feel motivated to do real, physical things to build a new life. And then...(drum roll, please)...you'll fail. Repeatedly.

I've gone through Phase 3 many times and watched hundreds of clients do the same. I've never seen a significant scheme succeed on the first try. Re-forming your life, like anything new, complex, and important, inevitably brings up problems you didn't expect. That's why, in contrast to the starry eyes that are so useful in Phase 2, Phase 3 demands the ingenuity of Thomas Edison and the tenacity of a pit bull.

What to Do

Expect Things To Go Wrong

Many of my clients have an early failure and consider this a sign that "it just wasn't meant to be." This is a useful philosophy if you want to spend your life as person soup. To become all that you can be, you must keep working toward your dreams even when your initial efforts are unsuccessful.

Be Willing to Start Over

Every time your plans fail, you'll briefly return to Phase 1, feeling lost and confused. This is an opportunity to release some of the illusions that created hitches in your plan.

Revisit Phase 2

Adjusting your dreams and schemes to include the truths you've learned from your experimentation.

Persist

Keep debugging and reimplementing your new-and-improved plans until they work. If you've followed all the steps above, they eventually will.

Phase 4: Flying

Here's the Deal

Phase 3 is like crawling out of your cocoon and waiting for your crumpled, soggy wings to dry and expand. Phase 4 is the payoff, the time when your new identity is fully formed and able to fly.

What to Do

The following strategies—which can help you optimize this delightful situation—are about fine-tuning, not drastic transformation.

Enjoy!

You've just negotiated a scary and dramatic transformation, and you deserve to savor your new identity. Spend time every day focusing on gratitude for your success.

Make Small Improvements

Find little ways to make your new life a bit less stressful, a bit more pleasurable.

Know That Another Change is Just Around the Bend

There's no way to predict how long you'll stay in Phase 4; maybe days, maybe decades. Don't attribute your happiness to your new identity; security lies in knowing how to deal with metamorphosis, whenever it occurs.

Read more: <http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Strategies-to-Deal-With-Every-Phase-of-Major-Life-Changes#ixzz3jx5AmbXw>