

# The Clocklike Regularity of Major Life Changes

Transitions feel like an abnormal disruption to life, but in fact they are a predictable and integral part of it.

**ARTHUR C. BROOKS**

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JAN BUCHCZIK

*“How to Build a Life” is a biweekly column by Arthur Brooks, tackling questions of meaning and happiness.*

Transitions are some of the most difficult periods in our lives. Even when we choose them, the disequilibrium they bring can be painful or frightening; when they are imposed upon us, they are even more distressing.

We have been awakening to the reality that the coronavirus pandemic is not a temporary affliction, but an involuntary transition from one way of life to another. Our jobs and personal lives are shifting and, in many cases, will never fully return to “normal.” The only certainty is that, even if a vaccine or cure comes along in the next few months or years, the future won’t look like the past. You may never go back to work like before. Dating may never be the same.

Your alma mater might go broke and disappear. Will you hug your friends or even shake hands as much as you used to? Perhaps not.

As uniquely uncomfortable as this feels, it isn’t so different from other life transitions. And truth be told, COVID-19 may not be the most difficult transition you are facing today. Almost every day, I hear from people who are quietly struggling much more through “ordinary” transitions, such as a divorce, the death of a loved one, or a forced retirement. Even when the transition is completely voluntary, it can be the source of intense suffering, because it involves adapting to new surroundings and changing your self-conception.

If we understand transitions properly, however, we can curb our natural tendency to fight against them—a futile battle, given their inevitability. Indeed, with a shift in mindset, we can make transitions into a source of meaning and transcendence.

Psychologists call the state of being in transition “liminality.” Scholars at INSEAD, a business school in France, and Rice University define this as “being betwixt and between social roles and/or identities.” In other words, liminality means that you are neither in the state you left nor completely in your new state, at least not mentally. This provokes something of an identity crisis—it raises the question “Who am I?”—which can be emotionally destabilizing.

Even good transitions can have this effect, as I know all too well. I was in a liminal state even before the coronavirus hit. After a decade as the president of a think tank, managing a large workforce of scholars at the vortex of Washington, D.C., policy battles, I left last summer to join academia, walking away from the people and job I knew and loved, and the excitement of being near the action of policy making.

This was all of my own volition, but that's scant comfort. My wife and I are still disoriented. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and mentally prepare for a day at the think tank, before remembering that was the past and I am in Massachusetts, not Maryland. Weirdly, I notice that my signature seems to have changed, as if I am trying to impersonate someone else. I don't regret the decision to change careers, but it has been difficult.

Transitions feel like an abnormal disruption to life, but in fact they are a predictable and integral part of it. While each change may be novel, major life transitions happen with clocklike regularity. Life is one long string of them, in fact. The author Bruce Feiler wrote a book called *Life Is in the Transitions: Mastering Change at Any Age*. After interviewing hundreds of people about their transitions, he found that a major change in life occurs, on average, every 12 to 18 months. Huge ones—what Feiler calls “lifequakes”—happen three to five times in each person's life. Some lifequakes are voluntary and joyful, such as getting married or having a child. Others are involuntary and unwelcome, such as unemployment or life-threatening illness.

Even huge collective transitions such as the pandemic happen with regularity, though the shapes they take vary wildly. Consider: If you are 30 years old, you were born during the collapse of the Soviet Union. At age 11, you saw the 9/11 terrorist attacks. At 18, you lived through the 2008 financial crisis. Today, it's COVID-19. In the coming decade, there will almost certainly be another unwelcome cataclysmic event—we just don't know what it is yet.

But here's the good news: Even difficult, unwanted transitions are usually seen differently in retrospect than in real time. Indeed, Feiler found that 90 percent of the time, the people he spoke with ultimately judged their transition to have been a success, insofar as the transition ended and they found themselves once again on solid ground.

Even better, research shows that we tend to see past events—even unwanted ones—as net positives over time. Though our brains have a tendency to focus on negative emotions in the present, over the years unpleasant feelings fade more than pleasant feelings do, a phenomenon known as “fading affect bias.” This may sound like a cognitive error, but it really isn't. Almost every transition—even the most challenging ones—bears *some* positive fruit; it just may take time to see it and feel its effects.

Difficult, painful transitions can yield great understanding of our lives' purpose. Research on how people derive a sense of purpose has found that while periods of pain and struggle make us temporarily unhappy, they also make us feel as if our lives have more meaning. For example, one of my sons is in the military. His boot camp was absolutely brutal, and a day after it finished, he told me that he'd never voluntarily do anything like that again. But today he talks about the experience—which earned him the title “U.S. marine”—with amusement, relish, and pride.

One of the things we learn by not resisting challenging transitions is how to cope with subsequent life changes. In his book *Meanings of Life*, the psychologist Roy F. Baumeister argues that a sense

of meaning gained through change makes the rest of life seem more stable. This is one of the great consolations of aging and seeing a lot of change—transitions likely don't cause as much distress.

Difficult periods can also stimulate innovation and ingenuity. A large amount of literature talks about “post-traumatic growth,” in which people derive long-term benefits from painful experiences, including more appreciation for life, richer relationships, greater resilience, and deeper spirituality. Another manifestation of this growth, according to some newer scholarship, is heightened creativity. I have noticed a new well of creative energy during my own transition. While I have always written and spoken a lot, my productivity has increased dramatically this past year, even during the pandemic; my comfort in exploring and expressing new ideas appears inversely related to my sense of stability. Among other things, this column is the fruit of my transition.

Life changes are painful, but inevitable. And as hard as they may be, we only make things harder—and risk squandering the benefits and lessons they can bring—when we work against them instead of with them. As I have argued in this column, those who benefit the most from painful periods are those who spend time experiencing and processing them. The right strategy is to accept transitions as an integral part of life, and lean into them.

The current period of transition in my life reminds me of fishing in the ocean. I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, and would fish off the rocks on the Oregon coast in the summers. I learned as a kid that the best time to catch fish was during a “falling tide”—the period when the tide is going out, or, you might say, transitioning. That's when plankton and bait fish are stirred up, so game fish are biting like crazy. If you put in your line, you'll pull them out, one after another. Practically the only mistake you can make is not to have your line in the water.

“Man was made for conflict, not for rest,” Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote. “In action is his power; not in his goals but in his transitions man is great.” I believe this is true, but it's so easy to forget. This very morning, upon waking, my first thoughts were about my old job and my friendships in D.C. Then, I thought about how much I hope the world returns quickly to the way it was before the pandemic. I guess I'm still resisting transitions a little bit.

But I know what I have to do. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, got up, and cast my line into the falling tide of the new day. Let's see what I catch.

Arthur C. Brooks is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*, a professor of the practice of public leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, a senior fellow at the Harvard Business School, and host of the podcast *The Art of Happiness With Arthur Brooks*.

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