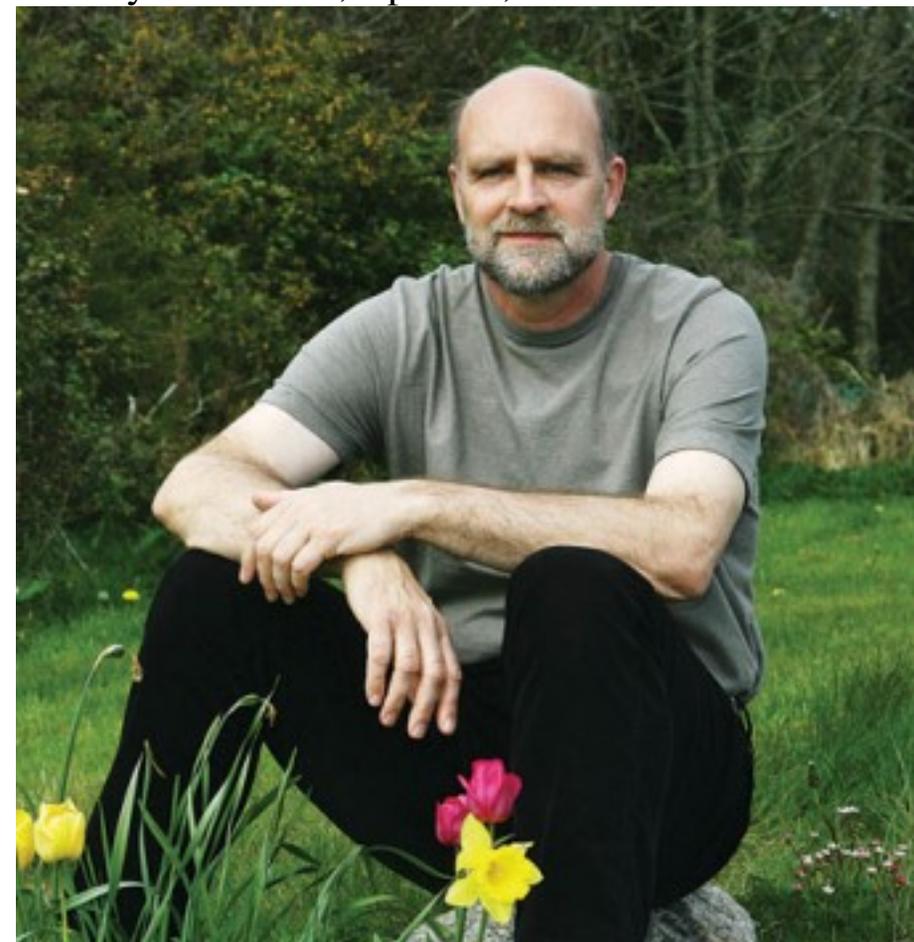


Managing change in difficult times

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The Chinese symbol for crisis is the same one for opportunity," says Norman Warden, a psychotherapist and lecturer.

Have you lost your job? Are you in debt? Is your home under threat? Are you afraid to tell your family just how bad things really are?

The economic downturn has brought many people face-to-face with the stresses of difficult personal changes, says Galway based psychotherapist and lecturer Norman Warden.

“Perhaps like many people you are recovering from a change in circumstances, in debt or unsure of your next step. A crisis/challenge/transition can bring us down or overwhelm us with anxiety. These are trying times and change is more difficult if it is out of our control, as with the current recession.”

He describes a transition as a movement from one set of circumstances to another, a bridge between two stages of greater stability.

It involves a process of change, a shift from one life structure to another, terminating the existing one and creating the possibility for a new one. Transitions lead to or require new roles, skills and attitudes. It involves a loss of something and a gain - it's a double edged sword.

Being in crisis

“A transition often involves a feeling of being in crisis as we lose something of what we had but also involves an opportunity to evaluate the direction we are heading.

“The Chinese symbol for crisis is the same one for opportunity. In my psychotherapy practice I've seen

many people coming in a crisis and then progressing on to seeing the crisis as an opportunity to re-evaluate their life choices. Sometimes a crisis alerts us to something in our life that we have been ignoring.”

In a crisis we go through well-defined stages:-

1. Initially, shock and numbness
2. Denial and anger. Refusal or reluctance to accept the bad news
3. Depression or sadness and fear
4. Acceptance of the new reality, letting go of the old
5. Moving forward to some kind of action and reinvesting ourselves into the new reality of changed circumstances

He says crises and transitions raise opportunities for personal growth. The challenge in life is to move on and not stagnate.

Fear of the unknown

“That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” Friedrich Nietzsche, German Philosopher

During the process of grappling with a change in our circumstances we initially can feel out of depth and unskilled in handling the stresses that arise, he explains.

However, as we adapt and learn to manage the new situation we begin to develop and integrate new personal skills and strengths gained.

“Humans have a strong need for excitement and stimulus yet they also fear taking risks and feeling out of control of their situation or caught up in their anxiousness. Change can be difficult for people because it means moving out of our comfort zone.”

Fear of change often involves fear of the unknown, of losing something, of consequences, and failure. He says useful questions to ask yourself are:- What previous experiences do you have of coping with crises and transitions in the past? What helped you then that you could apply this time around? What would someone you admire or respect do in your situation?

Your needs

“Ask yourself what do you need to help you manage this experience? You are likely to need increased support from others, and from supportive agencies and from yourself. You need to keep active, maintain a routine, and challenge negative self-defeating thoughts. We often make many negative and inaccurate assumptions which lead to more fear than necessary.”

Dealing with stressful emotions

It is not unusual to feel “overwhelmed” emotionally during a crisis, according to Mr Warden. “To regain some control start by breathing deeply and slowly and refocusing yourself on the present moment. Perhaps telling yourself ‘I am sitting on a solid chair, blue sky outside, solid wall around me’. The procedure below may also help you gain some distance from strong feelings: -

Recognise you have the emotion (‘I am feeling panicky’).

Allow the feeling to be present. Accept it’s there; that’s OK. No need to get into a fight over it.

Investigate. Notice how the feeling shows itself physically (‘My stomach feels jittery’)

Non identity - notice that there is more to you than your thoughts. Say to yourself: 'This is not all of me, just one of the many parts of me'

Then move on to some form of distraction - walking the prom, going for a swim, chatting to someone, absorbing yourself in the colours of the trees, etc.

Dealing with negative self-defeating thoughts

"You can't keep misery from coming, but you don't have to give it a chair to sit on" Anon

He says when particularly stressed we can torment ourselves with many negative self-defeating thoughts which then trigger off a negative feeling.

"You can learn how to manage negative thinking through the application of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), a well researched psychological approach that has gained much respect for its effective practical applications. The founder of CBT, Aaron Beck discovered the way in which people perceived, interpreted and attributed meaning to their experiences and daily life events played a major part in how they felt. Some of the most common negative thought patterns known as thinking errors (see below) have been found to be highly influential in triggering off or worsening anxious, depressive or angry moods."

Thinking errors

- * Jumping to conclusions: You interpret things negatively in the absence of sufficient evidence.
- * All or nothing thinking: You see things in absolute black-and-white terms. "I'm a total failure".
- * Personalising: You blame yourself for something for which you were not partially or entirely responsible.
- * Over generalisation: You view a negative experience as a never-ending pattern of defeat. "That's always happening to me." "I'm never any good at making decisions."
- * Discounting the positive: You dwell on negatives, ignore positives, and shrug off compliments.
- * Mind reading: You make negative assumptions about what other people are thinking; often about you; and with no concrete evidence to confirm this.
- * Fortune-telling: You treat as fact your predictions that future events will turn out badly.
- * Catastrophising: You blow things way out of proportion, dwelling on the worst possible outcome of a situation and overestimating the probability that it will occur.
- * Labelling: Instead of saying "I made a mistake", you tell yourself "I'm an idiot", "a fool".
- * Emotional reasoning: You treat your negative mood as a fact about you or others without checking the evidence. If you feel helpless you therefore believe you are.

Mr Warden says the first step in dealing with negative thinking is to write down the strongest negative thoughts as in the example given.

Negative thought: "I've lost my job. I'll never get another one."

Thinking error: Overgeneralisation - "never" and fortune telling.

Challenge the negative thought: Never? No one can predict the future with certainty.

Alternative thought: I can influence the future by how I act today.

Negative thought: I feel a total failure.

Thinking error: Emotional reasoning ('I feel') All or nothing (Total failure') Personalisation.

Challenge the negative thought: Never?

No one can predict the future with certaint. Would I say that to a close friend who lost his job?

If a friend felt a failure that wouldn't make it so. I am reasoning from how I feel only rather than the facts

Alternative thought: I can influence the future by how I act today. Like many others I lost my job because of the recession. It's nothing personal to me. I have many strengths to offer an employer.

“The aim is to weigh up the evidence for the negative thought, question its validity and consider if there is a more reality based alternative that fits more appropriately with the facts. It also helps not to take our thoughts literally, as facts, without checking out the evidence.”

Norman Warden, an IACP accredited psychotherapist who lectures at GMIT on cognitive behavioural therapy and facilitates counselling courses in Galway, will facilitate an eight week course on managing stress through Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in Galway starting on Thursday May 12 at 7pm.

He will also conduct a foundation certificate in counselling skills course starting on September 17. For further details visit www.galwaycounselling.com or telephone (086) 3954939.

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