

Transitions, Change and Crises

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*"What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from."*

(T.S. Eliot, 1944, p42)

Introduction

In the 1990's jobs are changed more frequently, people move home, knowledge acquired becomes outdated. Technological and scientific discoveries become more rapidly available but can later be discarded. Within our culture we all manage and deal with change – we all experience endings and loss, new beginnings and 'start afresh' experiences.

Endings and loss can be particularly difficult for us to deal with. This is often epitomised in the idiomatic language we hear after the occurrence of an event perceived as unpleasant: "stop dwelling on the past"; "what's done is done"; "put it behind you"; "let bygones be bygones". These are usually attempts to help the receiver cope better. However, none of these phrases provides the listener with guidance as to how to move on in practice from their experiences and how to learn most effectively from them. We do not necessarily learn useful patterns of dealing with changes, either desired or undesired.

Sometimes we can take change too seriously, at other times not seriously enough, and on such occasions we can underestimate the impact it may be having upon ourselves and others. Learning to deal and cope with the continuous opportunities for choice and accelerated change presented is important in helping prepare individuals for coping in situations where change is not anticipated, such as at times of crisis and when critical events occur.

Learning to Deal with Change

Our methods of dealing with change and transitions can vary greatly from individual to individual and are often determined by our early experiences. We carry out the directions and models provided by parents and social groups. These models are so much part of us that we are frequently unaware of the influences. They are often things that we have learned, which we have accepted unquestioningly and unconsciously. Within the educational system, both formally and informally, young people have the opportunity to develop further their skills in coping with change, both expected and unexpected.

Young people must learn and develop the skills involved in coping with change. They need to be able to identify feelings and express them and to develop appropriate individual and social behaviour. They need to be able to talk about themselves, their families, communities and possessions; to remember past experiences and look forward to the future; to learn about transitions including the major life experiences of birth, death and divorce.

Mental Health and Empowerment

Power is “the ability to influence intentionally what happens to us in relation to other people and the physical world. To ‘empower’ is to get in touch or help someone else get in touch with these abilities” (Hopson and Scally, 1981, p53).

Many people restrict their own growth and development far more than they recognise. People can become more aware of their self imposed constraints and acquire appropriate skills and resources to help themselves to develop more control over what happens to them, to give themselves greater self direction and more flexibility. The more people take charge of themselves, their choices and reactions, the more likely they are to be able to empower others and to contribute to the development of empowering environments in which others can live, work and play.

Seligman (1975) in a significant series of research studies has shown how feelings of helplessness are learned. When people respond to situations in which they feel that what happens to them is not connected in any way to their actions, the result can be depression - a confirming belief in one's own helplessness. Seligman's work on treating learned helplessness indicates the difficulties involved in extricating a person who is depressed from such beliefs and

giving them insights into how they can effect change. People need skills to change some aspect of themselves, to specify desired outcomes and be able to act on them, to identify that alternatives exist and choose between them on the basis of one's values, priorities and commitment, knowing that there is always a choice.

The Promotion of Emotional and Psychological Health in Schools

There is a general view within this culture that childhood should be a time of happiness and be carefree; that young people should have few responsibilities or demands placed upon them, and that young people should be sheltered from crises or unhappy events.

There can sometimes be a concern on the part of teachers that to discuss negative experiences in a school context may do more harm than good and provide more upset than benefits. The view often taken is that the more difficult subjects of death, bereavement and divorce should be left for others to discuss, for example parents, friends and relatives. However, the more these experiences are excluded from an educational context and not formally recognised as part of ongoing life experience, the more this decreases the chances of developing appropriate models of expressing feelings and, consequently, of coping.

School is a large part of young people's lives and models of how to cope and how to deal with difficult situations can be included in the ongoing experience of young people. A great deal of learning in schools occurs through demonstration. Students observe adults' behaviour and styles of operating, and they learn from these. An environment such as a family or a school can take away an individual's feelings of power by accident as well as by design. It is futile for staff or parents to stress verbally the importance of cooperation, forgiveness, kindness, honesty, openness and non-aggression, if these qualities are not visible in relationships with other adults and in adult-child contact. How school staff relate, communicate and function collectively ought to involve the practice of any skills they would wish to develop in their pupils.

Teaching life skills is therefore not restricted to the preparation of particular lessons but involves teachers undertaking their own personal development and ensuring skills' acquisition of the competencies they wish to teach. Teaching pupils to challenge, to enquire how things are, never to take for granted, to seek out alternatives and better ways of doing things, is equipping them to learn from any situation. Owning their own opinions, ideas and experience is likely to be more significant than reciting other people's answers.

We need to structure learning environments so as to ensure that people have successful experiences of problem solving and learning to deal with minor crises. The theme of empowering the individual and thereby inviting development, commitment and responsibility is particularly evident in the Promoting Social Competence Initiative (Bremner and Topping, 1998 and 1999). Any skills development programme has an important objective - the development of responsibility for oneself, equipping each individual with the skills and an approach to life that will reduce over-dependency.

Staff Responses to Pupils which Promote Emotional and Psychological Health

General considerations

Teachers should encourage independence, self-reliance and initiative on the part of pupils. They should encourage pupils to say more about themselves, their interests, feelings and experiences. They should accept the display of emotions as necessary and a part of school life and, therefore, not something to be ashamed of. This includes grieving responses to change and loss. School staff members should formally accept death as part of life, rather than collude by never mentioning it (as if denying its reality). Indeed, their own acknowledgement that they can experience just as much loss as pupils in, for example, the routine of school changes such as year-ends would be helpful, as is listening seriously to problems and talking about them frankly.

Life-skills training by school staff

We should support young people's positive sense of self and allow them the freedom to question. We should support assertiveness, independence and autonomy. It is important to reinforce positive ways of handling problems and to capitalise on the important role of play in exploring and learning from mistakes. Games can be beneficial in helping to develop problem-solving abilities. Good communication is the foundation of good coping skills and is necessary for young people in ensuring that they get help when they require it and can overcome isolation. Young people need to be able to identify and articulate their feelings in order to understand their experiences. They must recognise when to take action and know how to communicate with those who can help. It is, therefore, important to develop young people's experiences of teachers as trusted adults, to whom they can turn.

Young People and Trauma

What school staff can do about crises

There will always be crises in the lives of young people. The impact on children of witnessing physical and/or emotional abuse of a parent is now being recognised more fully and is yet more evidence that young people can be as susceptible to trauma as adults. A major step in dealing with childhood crises is for school staff to have a greater awareness of what constitutes a crisis or critical incident and what are the signs to look out for. School personnel can learn about reactions to critical events, stress responses and how to respond appropriately; co-ordinating effective intervention with other personnel and parents; when and how to use external resources (for example, school psychologist and therapists) to best effect. Preparedness of the organisation increases the likelihood of an appropriate response in the event of a crisis. Whether or not an incident becomes a traumatic experience will depend to some extent upon the teachers and caring professionals' responses and on the level of preparatory work that has been done to help the young person.

Professional awareness of incidence and manifestation

Just as not all crises lead to trauma in adults, so too not all crises lead to trauma in young people. However, the needs of traumatised young people are more likely to be neglected, not because adults intentionally would leave a young person to suffer, but at times through the misguided belief that things are better left alone, that time will heal automatically or that, because the young person has not said anything, they have not been affected. Therefore, in many situations no action is taken.

This is not to suggest that school staff or other professionals should assume that the young person is in trauma, but they should be open to the possibility of trauma. School staff members should also take into consideration their own history of personal crisis and how that may affect their interpretation of, and response to, crises in the lives of young people. The way in which school personnel respond to critical incidents can influence the degree or traumatic impact on the young people involved, both inside and outside the classroom

Reactions to critical events

Responses to critical incidents are as differing and unique as the individuals experiencing them. However there can be identifiable patterns of responses. Whatever the behavioural changes, these are normal responses and reactions to abnormal circumstances.

Suppression of thoughts and emotions

Emotional upset and faltering attempts to accommodate new, discrepant and frequently threatening information about the world can result in suppression of certain thoughts and emotions as the individual attempts to maintain balance. On some occasions, as the events are gradually assimilated, they begin to emerge and eventually become integrated. This is part of normal recovery.

Upset by own reactions

Young people can be upset by their own reactions to an event. Feelings of disorientation, emotional upset and physical symptoms can be very frightening for both young people and those around them, yet they can be very normal.

Problems with decision making

Basic decision making and problem solving can be problematic for traumatised young people. Difficulty in distinguishing between trivial and important information and problems in setting priorities may lead people in crisis to behave in inappropriate ways within a given context.

Calmness

Young people in crisis can often appear calm because they are having difficulty making sense of an event.

Communication difficulties

A critical incident can place intense demands on an individual's ability to communicate given the disorientation often experienced by self or others. However, although it is difficult for young people to do this, this can be a time of great need. Effective communication skills will be necessary to be able to make sense of the situation, to work out successful coping strategies, to make needs known and to ask for assistance.

Difficulties identifying support systems

The support system for the individual is important. Sometimes the crisis has involved the removal of a key person in the individual's support system, whether as a result of the death of the person or their own involvement in the crisis. Young people sometimes have difficulty conceptualising the changed support system, and can have problems determining their own support needs and how to get these needs met.

How to talk to a young person in crisis

What to do

People generally, having experienced a traumatic event, are in a greater state of arousal. Their sensitivity is also aroused and thus ill chosen words, poor advice and well intentioned untruths can have a significant impact.. It is therefore important to be clear and aware of your communication with the individual. The response of the listener should be calm, non-judgmental and concerned. Listeners should judge their own ability to be effective. If they were too upset this would not be helpful. It is important to be aware of incongruent messages - saying one thing but gestures and facial expressions that say something else. Validating feelings is important. The feelings that a young person is experiencing can be very strong, even when their exterior may appear impassive. There are no 'right' feelings for a young person to display. Listening well and showing belief in order to facilitate expression are also important. Being proactive in ensuring that you are not unwittingly apportioning blame can be vital at such times.

What not to do

People do not intentionally make things worse, but they can do. Young people have been asked what helps and what they have found unhelpful.

Where those around are overly emotional, this can be hard for the young person to deal with. This does not mean that staff cannot show empathy or sympathy, but excessive emotion or 'falling apart' put increased pressure upon the individual who already has enough to cope with. Making promises you cannot keep or pretending to know things when you don't are also highly inadvisable. This is a time for listening to the needs of the individual, so care should be taken that you are not imposing your own values. Too detailed questioning may well prevent the student talking further, hence the importance of listening and assisting them to reveal what is necessary at a particular point. Emotional withdrawal from a young person in crisis should be avoided. This does not mean that young people in crisis have to be given inappropriate levels of attention, but they should be integrated into the ongoing classroom structure with caring, supportive and listening school staff.

Events that happen to a young person can affect their performance in class, but they can also have an impact upon the class as a whole. A class is a group where, just as in families, the relationships lead to influences beyond the individual. Difficulties shared can contribute to greater cohesiveness in the group. Or they can lead to disintegration. It is thus important to acknowledge the potential impact.

Apparent Setbacks

There can be times when it would seem that a young person's emotional state is deteriorating, even though they had shown signs of beginning to recover. Emotional upset may be triggered by the occurrence of a similar situation. The trigger can sometimes be an event which does not seem obviously connected, but may have preceded or coincided with the incident and thus become associated. Such events can be less easy for staff to identify. Anniversaries can also be difficult times. It may be that emotional upset is a good sign in a young person who has not previously shown their reactions, but is now starting to confront and deal with something that previously was avoided.

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Transitions and Change

**“What we call the beginning is often the end.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.”**

T. S. Eliot

School staff responses that promote emotional psychological health:

- **Encourage independence, self reliance and initiative**
- **Encourage pupils' self expression of interests, feelings and experiences**
- **Recognise that each of us is both a teacher and a learner**
- **Accept display of emotion as a part of school life**
- **Acknowledge personal experiences of loss e.g. in the routine of class changes such as year ends**
- **Listen to problems seriously and talk about them frankly**

Preventative Work by Staff

- **Support a positive sense of self**
- **Encourage freedom of expression**
- **Reinforce problem solving**
- **Capitalise on learning from mistakes**
- **Develop positive communication skills**
- **Recognise and label feelings**
- **Utilise positive prevention**
- **Dispel myths**
- **Recognise and label feelings**

How to Talk to a Young Person in Crisis

The importance of the good listener responses

- **Be aware of incongruent messages**
- **Validate feelings (there are no 'right' feelings)**
- **Listen well and show belief**
- **Seek to dispel any sense of fault**
- **Identify sources of support and how to access these e.g. friends**

Exercise One

Transitions

Think of a positive transition or change that you have recently experienced (either personal or professional) which you are happy to discuss with a colleague.

Discuss in pairs:

- 1 Was it one that you wanted or chose to make?
- 2 What were the stages in this transition?
- 3 What was necessary for the change or transition to take place? Track back in time from the point at which you are now at to the point at which it seems the transition began.
- 4 How completely do you think or feel that you have made the transition?
- 5 What have you learned from it that would be useful for you in the future?

Exercise Two

School staff responses to pupils which promote emotional and psychological health

(Personal questionnaire, not for collection)

On a scale of 1 - 5 rate the importance of the following ways of responding to pupils, where 1 is important and 5 is the least important:

- Encouraging pupil independence, self reliance and initiative.
- Encouraging pupils to speak about themselves, interests, feelings and experiences.
- Expressing to pupils that everyone is in the roles of teacher and learner.
- Accepting and endorsing that displays of emotions as part of school life are necessary and not something to be ashamed of (for example, grieving responses to change and loss).
- School staff prepared to talk about death as part of life.
- Acknowledging that teachers face loss (as well as pupils) in the routine of class changes, such as year-ends.
- Listening to problems seriously and talking about them frankly.

Exercise Three

How effectively does your organisation function as a system in promoting emotional and psychological health?

In pairs:

Identify two statements from the list below, which in your view describe areas that are currently operating well in your school. Discuss how both of these are/have been achieved in your school.

Choose another two statements that you consider would be important areas for development in your school. Identify ways in which this could be done.

Be prepared to give feedback on your discussion to the whole group.

Statements

1. There are signs in the organisation that people are valued and respected.
- 0 There are ways in which value is denied.
1. There are indications that relationships are based upon genuineness, so that people operate openly rather than defensively.
2. There is evidence that attempts are made to see each others' points of view and that listening to each others' opinions is a normal activity.
3. Individuals receive constructive feedback about their work.
4. People take part in decisions, which affect their personal and professional life.
5. Conflict is used and dealt with constructively. Differences are explored and solutions sought.
6. Groups and individuals attempt to work through negotiations, rather than seek to win at the expense of others.
7. There is a deliberate attempt to strive for consensus.
- 1 Mistakes are worked through and lessons learned.
1. Our work and the contributions of others are evaluated.

Exercise Four

Indicators of the Emotional State of Young People

In threes:

Think of **one young person** whom you would describe as 'emotionally vulnerable' and **one young person** whom you would describe as 'psychologically healthy'.

Identify some of the characteristics and evidence that has led you to reach these conclusions, for example behaviours, mannerisms, types of language they use.

Generate two lists for sharing with the group.

Exercise Five

Responding to people in crisis

Think of a personal experience which was upsetting and which was known to other people, for example bereavement, divorce, car accident (you will not be asked to discuss the specific details in this exercise). With a partner identify what were the approaches or types of responses made by other people, which:

- 1 were unhelpful
- 2 were helpful
- 3 might have helped, but did not happen.

How have you or would you use this experience to influence your own responses to other people experiencing a crisis?

Transitions Change and Crises

Suggestions on the use of exercises

Exercise One : Transitions

The purpose of this exercise is to connect participants with their experiences of change; to note that it can still be an ongoing experience; that despite having ostensibly changed job, house etc there can still be the feeling of not having completed the process.

Participants can be reminded that when dealing with a young person who has experienced a crisis, even though a significant amount of time has passed since the crisis, it is possible that the experience is not fully over for the young person.

Exercise Two: School staff responses to pupils which promote emotional and psychological health

The purpose of this exercise is to get participants to think about their own attitudes towards pupils and how they feel about the area of promoting pupils' psychological health. This exercise *could* be done with a whole staff group, where scores are written up anonymously so that the overall ethos can be drawn out.

Exercise Three: How effectively does your organisation function as a system in promoting emotional and psychological health?

The purpose of this exercise is to encourage participants to think about emotional and psychological health within the organisation in which they work. Stress is placed on the importance of planning and preparation for critical incidents taking place not in a vacuum, but in the context of a genuinely supportive environment.

Exercise Four: Indicators of the emotional state of young people

The purpose of this exercise is to encourage participants to use their knowledge and experience of young people to draw out a list of the range of features, which pupils may display. In some cases this may lead to a fresh look at disruptive behaviour as possibly indicating emotional difficulties requiring attention of a different kind.

Exercise Five: Responding to people in crisis

A chance to consider helpful and unhelpful responses, and for participants to reflect on their own practice.