



ELKANAH COUNSELLING

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Festive Season 2009

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Consultations by
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We are nearly at the end of another year. It reminds us of all sorts of changes that occur at this time each year.

Little ones start preparing for Kindergarten or Prep. At school, older teenagers complete V.C.E. and prepare for University or T.A.F.E. or look for work. Some young adults leave home to travel or live elsewhere. People change jobs or retire or get retrenched. Others buy or sell houses.

We begin our summer with weather changes and the worries about water use and now especially, bushfires.

Christmas is just around the corner too.

Change is a personal experience. This is true whether the change is related to some aspect of our work or our personal life. There are feelings of anxiety as well as moments of joy, enthusiasm and satisfaction. It doesn't matter what our age is. Some people cope better than others with change, depending on their disposition, background, self esteem and particular circumstances.

In this newsletter, we discuss ways to cope with change and the difficult stresses sometimes associated with these issues.

As always, best wishes for the coming year!

Lyn Shand
– Psychologist & Family Therapist

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Teenage Study Problems - Tips for Perplexed Parents

Lyn Shand

Parents, teachers and even school principals often ask a counsellor to help students with “Study Skills”. This really means a number of different things:

- a) The work is genuinely too difficult for the student or they have a specific learning disability.
- b) The student lacks organisational skills and/ or procrastinates
- c) The student is less mature than others in the year level, which causes social problems
- d) There are other worries unrelated to school that makes school work irrelevant or less important
- e) Parents are having difficulty in assisting their son or daughter to become independent.

First, as parents, you will have had interviews with teachers over the years by now and will have an idea about your teenager’s ability. Perhaps they do well, or at least cope reasonably, with Humanities subjects or Art but struggle with Maths/Science (or vice versa). Encourage your teenager to seek help from teachers. Discuss with your son/daughter whether or not they would like some private tutoring. The value of this comes from the young person seeing it as useful – otherwise you will be wasting your money and setting up resentment in your teenager. In some cases in later school years, the student will need to make informed decisions about which subjects to continue and which ones to drop. Encourage them to get counselling from a Careers Counsellor or Co-ordinator if they are in doubt. Some schools do testing of abilities and interests to help with these choices. Parents can also talk to these adults at the school. This way the young person can explore alternatives that suit them and keep as many options open as possible. Going to Open Days from Year 10 on, can also give students a clearer idea of what courses are like at T.A.F.E. and Universities.

If the problem has more to do with the student being disorganized, the best thing you can do, is to tell them often that you believe they are capable. Don’t do things for them. Encourage them to do things for themselves (maybe show them how first) and then praise them for their efforts. Frequently these young people lack confidence. A counsellor or psychologist can help provide support with further techniques and encouragement. Sometimes two or three friends who feel they have difficulty in organizing their work will come as a group to see the counsellor or a support teacher.

The student who is a late developer can feel very isolated from his/her peers. This can split friendships due to changing interests for one but not for the other. This often happens around Year 9 when the peer group is very important. Young people are

beginning their journey towards independence so the friends are where they need to belong. They need to have some interests in common at this stage of their development. Be sympathetic and encourage areas where your teenager can mix with, or meet others at a similar developmental level to him/her. Remember that if they feel they have no friends, schoolwork is little compensation. Often the student will become the class clown or troublemaker, to get noticed by peers. They may also become depressed. If there is a vast discrepancy between your teenager and the others at that year level, discuss with the coordinator or counsellor, whether or not it would be better for the young person to repeat the year, at times at another school.

Since friendships are so important to teenagers, it is not hard to see why cyber bullying is such a major problem for this age young person.

When there are worries outside of school, schoolwork will often suffer. Of course, individual differences will mean that some young people will cope better with stress than others. However, factors such as death (of a pet, friend or relative), separation or divorce, conflict within the family (either hidden or overt), illness, moving to another location, or in fact change of any sort can have a detrimental effect on young people. Their concentration levels will drop as their energy is directed towards their anxieties. Factors such as changes in eating or sleeping habits, mood swings, and change in personality, obvious academic decline, alcohol or drug abuse, isolation from friends are all warning signs. If these conditions apply, seek professional help. You may benefit from professional help too. If you don't know who would be the best professional to see, consult your local doctor or ring the Australian Psychological Society for an appropriate psychologist who deals with young people.

When there are none of the above problems but your son or daughter is not working, perhaps you are being too conscientious as a parent. You cannot control your teenager at this stage, nor is it in their best interests for you to do so. They must be allowed to take responsibility for their own lives. Over-protection or over control – feeling that you must wake them up, remind them to take their lunch or spots uniform, or decide who their friends should be, or stand over them or do their homework for them are all bad ideas. It can make them openly rebellious or quietly NOT do their schoolwork, as they try to prove they can make their own decisions. Their self esteem will be low, because by you taking control, you are indirectly telling them that they are helpless or incapable of making decisions for themselves. They may take some risks, make some mistakes with this process but you don't want these to be major ones. Help them to make informed decisions, and meantime look to other areas in which to define yourself, other than "as a good parent". They need that sort of support when they are toddlers or at Primary School but not at adolescence. Adolescence is all about negotiation. A slightly rebellious adolescent may be doing you a good turn!

P.S. "Letting Go"

When do parents stop being parents? When their children are 18, 21? To "let go" is to take responsibility for your own actions. That does not mean having to take responsibility for other people's actions – that is for them to do for themselves.

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Short-Cuts to Change

John Andersen

Therapy is about change. People seek help because they want change to happen. And they have hit a brick wall. They have not been able to make the changes they want on their own. If seeing a counsellor also fails to lead to change, people conclude that counselling was useless; it did not help.

How do we change? I am not presenting a “magic bullet”, but I have discovered a short cut to change. This short cut involves focusing on what successful change looks like, rather than focusing on understanding the problem. Developing an understanding of what caused the problem and why I have the problem is often useful. But it does not substitute for the task of changing. Even with a good understanding of the problem, the task of change still remains in front of me.

How do we change? First, it is recognising that a problem is not something I have, but something I do. We all actively maintain and perpetuate the problems we have by acting in ways that express the problems. Let me illustrate by describing a problem we may call “Not Coping.” A person who is Not Coping acts in a certain way. Emotionally, a person is stressed, anxious, very distracted, irritable, easily gets angry, and is unable to center and focus on any one thing. A person does a lot of negative self-defeating self-talk, such as “I can’t cope.” “I am not able to get everything done,” “I don’t know where to start,” “It’s too much!” The result is there is a lot of negative emotional noise that gets in the way of a person being able to focus on getting anything done.

Behaviourally, a person is very ineffective in focusing on doing any one task. Tasks may be rushed with the results that mistakes are made, things overlooked, and the task badly done. Tasks may be left uncompleted as the person rushes on to the next thing, or the person may be too upset and despairing, that the tasks are not even attempted. The person ends up being very unproductive. The result is the day is spent being distressed, and at the end of the day, very little has been accomplished. Consequently, the person looks back on the day, and it only strengthens the sense that he or she is not coping. Not Coping takes a lot of energy; it requires a lot of effort. It involves a lot of doing. The result of all this effort is the sense of not coping is only confirmed and strengthened.

In this case change involves doing the alternative, which is Coping. A person who is Coping acts very differently. Under pressure, a person who is Coping, emotionally focuses on centering him or herself, staying calm and emotionally contained. Coping is expressed in self-statements that are encouraging, such as “One thing at a time.” “You’ll manage.” “Don’t worry, everything will be all right.” A person who is doing Coping is actively managing how he or she is feeling, and deliberately encouraging herself in her self-talk. Behaviourally, a person who is coping makes decisions about what task she will do next, prioritizing tasks according to importance and urgency, and just getting on with doing what he or she can do one thing at a time. A Coping person focuses on what *can* be done, rather than what *can’t* be done. The outcome Coping leads to is at the end of the day the person has a sense of accomplishment, or having managed and having gotten some things done, having survived. Coping also takes a lot of effort, but it is more productive.

The above contrast illustrates that a person who is Not Coping acts quite differently to a person who is Coping. These two different courses of action lead to different outcomes.

A person may use counselling to develop a deep understanding of why he or she is Not Coping. Nevertheless, change will not occur until the person has ceased Not Coping and instead is doing Coping. Change is behavioural! Change happens when a person has started doing something different.

So a short-cut to change is to focus on what the desired change looks like and immediately start doing that, no matter how one feels. For example, a question I like to invite my clients to ask is, “If I was Coping right now, what would that look like and what would it feel like?” Once a person has identified what Coping would look like in their present situation, then I challenge them to go ahead and do precisely that. That is, get a picture of Coping, and immediately start doing that.

What I have found is once a person focuses on doing Coping, the feelings get on board, and they find themselves in a different space. They have stepped into doing change, and it immediately begins to have its own rewarding impact. They begin to feel better, more hopeful, and encouraged. This only encourages them to deliberately do Coping even more. I have found that simply acting “as if I was...” is a powerful short-cut to change.

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Tips for Managing Change & Stress

Lyn Shand

Stress is inevitable. It is normal and useful and necessary in making changes throughout our lives. Since life demands our involvement with change, we have to learn to live with stress. Otherwise we can postpone living until we're dead!

However, what is stressful for one person may not cause difficulty for someone else.

You can recognise that you have a stress problem when your coping ability is outweighed by stressful events or if they become extreme. Settings can include work, family, relationships, social or cultural situations or health.

There are some physical indicators of too much stress. These include: - dizziness, headache, muscle tension, heart palpitations, shaking, indigestion, sexual difficulties, fatigue and aches and pains. They can also include symptoms of cardiovascular disease. The stimulation of the body in response to stressful events is called the “Fight or Flight” response. Adrenalin and cortisol are produced when the brain perceives danger. The involuntary nervous system sends out messages all over the body to prepare for an emergency. This is fine if it lasts for a short time but if it goes on and on, we can experience symptoms of “distress”. Other warning signs to look for are:

- Finding it difficult to get along with people
- Life feels dissatisfying – small pleasures aren't important anymore

- You are constantly thinking about your anxieties
- Things that used not to bother you now do
- You may feel inadequate and have feelings of self doubt constantly
- You may feel tired all the time
- You may be abusing drugs or alcohol or prescription medication

You may need to see as doctor to eliminate the possibility of other disorders, such as thyroid disease, cardio-vascular indicators, strong anxiety, panic disorder or depression. If the latter problems are there, the doctor may give you medication and /or send you to see a psychologist or other specialist.

CAUSES OF “DYSTRESS”

Personality

Some people are more predisposed to stressful events. They are more sensitive than other people. They need to be more careful about their emotional and mental health. Such people are also more genetically prone to anxiety and depression.

Energy Reserves

Large energy reserves increase the ability to deal with stress. Some people seem to have more energy than others and may be able to do more things and still cope. People vary in how much sleep they need. However, getting enough sleep and eating nutritious food, finding time for your style of relaxation and hobbies improve energy levels.

Fitness and Health

Good health and fitness increases our ability to deal with change and stressful events. Illness and hormonal changes deplete our ability to cope. In a physically fit person the stress response to a given stressor is less dramatic.

Support Systems

The amount of available support from family, friends and people at work, affects your ability to cope with stress and change too. We need support and acceptance from others and to talk things through. Professional counselling can also provide this kind of support as well.

GRIEF AND LOSS

This can be to do with a death or grief from a loss of relationship in such cases of separation and divorce. It can also be associated in older people with the loss of health, hearing, sight or independence. There is no particular order of experience that occurs when a person is suffering from grief or loss. However, the following factors are nearly always present to some extent:-

Denial – to escape the reality, the mind refuses to acknowledge the loss

Crying – This is a healthy way to express how you’re feeling. It is also helpful to talk to someone about your loss

Anger – It is a normal reaction to those experiencing the pain and hurt of loss

Physical Symptoms – Not being able to eat or sleep are common. So can be such things as pain in the chest (this latter symptom should be investigated of course)

Disorientation – Inability to even cope with shopping or housekeeping is common

Loneliness – You miss the company of the person gone and are reminded of them temporarily by such items as clothes, their special chair etc. In older people this can be to do with their inability to get out and about anymore.

Depression – This usually hits when the full impact of the reality of the loss is grasped.

Acceptance – Slowly the individual needs to be encouraged to face the loss

- Give yourself permission to grieve
- Don't run away from the pain

- Reinvest your energies gradually socially
- Give yourself permission to stop grieving

Life does go on and it is healthy to enjoy its riches to the full even though circumstances have changed.

LEARNING TO BE ASSERTIVE

This is a topic I am often discussing with clients in our psychology practice.

Bossing others around, dismissing their viewpoint, ignoring them or butting into their conversation is being aggressive.

Giving in or giving up or not expressing what you think or feel honestly, is being passive or non-assertive.

Assertiveness is NOT aggression. It is expressing the way you think or feel honestly. Remember you have the right to make mistakes, change your mind, say “No”, and refuse to explain. Others have these same rights. Use “I” messages rather than “You” messages when expressing yourself

CHANGING YOUR THINKING

These days doctors and psychologists talk about Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to help change irrational thinking. Irrational beliefs include: - feeling helpless, exaggerating problems, being a victim, wanting other people to change.

Some other irrational beliefs include:-

All the important people in my life must love and appreciate me

I must be extremely competent and capable

When people act badly, especially towards me, I must blame or punish them

Things should work out the way I want them to. If not it's a catastrophe. I can't stand it

It's better not to face problems than to risk failure

Only after I finish all my work can I relax and enjoy myself

We need to analyse our beliefs to find evidence that what we think is true, valid or real. This is called “disputing your thinking”.

How do we change our irrational thinking? First you need to:-

Look at an event e.g. losing your job or loss of income

You need to analyse your belief e.g. “I'll never get another job!” or “This is terribly unfair – it shouldn't have happened”.

Consequences depend on changing the irrational belief to a more rational one

If you change it to a rational thought, you may think, e.g. “I need to look for another job for the sake of my family.”

Otherwise the person may suffer from depression or anxiety, anger and/or a feeling of helplessness unnecessarily.

Negative thinking also gets in the way of rational thinking. Negative thinkers include the perfectionist, the sad sack, the martyr, the wimp, the “good” girl or boy ruled by the “shoulds” or “shouldn’ts” and the victim.

OTHER TIPS TO MANAGE CHANGE AND STRESS

Get to know yourself and others

Set a routine that works for you – be organized

Eat good food and maintain a reasonable weight

Keep fit – walking, gardening, sport, dancing, swimming etc.

Express your emotions appropriately – don’t bottle them up or blurt them out inappropriately

Take a holiday

Keep in touch with friends or join a group

Use positive self talk – deal with irrational beliefs

Have hobbies or activities you enjoy

Have a pet

Grow a garden

Do whatever relaxes you

Avoid the use of tranquillizers, drugs, alcohol, to relieve anxiety or depression. where ever possible

Stop trying to be perfect

Learn to breathe evenly and deeply

Have an action plan, set new goals and make a commitment to change

Get professional help if you feel stuck with any of these issues

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We would like to take this opportunity to wish
you peace, joy and good health for
this festive season and
throughout
next year.



ELKANAH NEWSLETTER

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