Hi everybody, and thanks for joining us today for this recorded webinar on Change: How to adapt, cope and respond. My name is Erica Hanlon. I’m a licensed professional counselor. Today we’re going to talk about change and how you can navigate it. As part of today’s webinar, we really want to help you understand how you personally respond to change. What we know about change is that when we encounter something where we have to make an adjustment that we tend to go through different phrases. We’re going to talk about what those phases of change typically look like. Finally, we’re going to give some tools for coping with change.

Here’s the thing, change is happening right now. Chances are that by the time you finish this webinar you’re going to be a different person then who you are right now, and hopefully you will know some different things. What’s interesting is that biologically ourselves are always constantly regenerating themselves. Science shows that every four years that physically we are different people than we were four years ago just because all of our selves have undergone that change process.

The lesson is that change is inevitable. It’s going to happen regardless. I think as it grows it’s optional. How we experience that change, how we cope with it, how we deal with it is really a testament to us and how we handle it and how we’re able to move on. When you encounter a change I really encourage you to look for opportunities to grow, and look for those opportunities to maybe stretch yourself and learn something new. As part of today’s webinar I would really encourage you to think about a particular change that maybe you’re going through right now, and think about what are the feelings that are coming up for you, what are the struggles you’re encountering, what are you nervous about. Hopefully we’ll be able to give you some tools to cope with that situation as part of today’s webinar.

The thing is that change is hard for everybody. So if you’re struggling with a change, congratulations because you are completely normal. I’ve heard a saying that, “The only people who actually enjoy change our babies with dirty diapers.” I think that’s kind of funny, but it’s also pretty true. Nobody really likes change because it disrupts our sense of normal. I think that what’s really funny about change is that even if we're in a situation where we’re not really all that happy, that change is still hard for us.

I have a friend who recently changed jobs. He was in the same job for eight years, and he was really unhappy for the last two years. There’d been some change in management, and change in a way that his responsibilities were allocated, and he was just really not that happy for a while. I asked him I said, “Joel, are you not looking for a different job? And he said, ”Well, you know the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t.” I think that a lot of times that’s true that we end up sticking with a situation that is really not making us happy because we know what to expect.
For Joel, he knew Monday through Friday when he walked into work he knew what he was going to run into. He knew what was going to frustrate him and he knew what to expect. In some ways that feels safer than applying to a new job and starting a new position where we don’t know what to expect, we don’t know what the management is going to be like. A lot of times we feel safe in that discomfort in our current situation. Think about what it is that maybe is keeping you from moving forward.

Here are some facts about change. We know that the earlier you learn something, the harder it is to change it. There’s a reason that they have that saying about old dogs and you can’t teach them new tricks. It’s true; the earlier you learn something, the harder it is change it. We also know that because change is hard for us, we tend to seek out people who are like us, because then we don’t have to challenge the way that we think about things and the way that we make our decisions. That includes our religious beliefs, our political beliefs. We tend to find people who are going to validate our beliefs and our thoughts on different situations.

We also hate to feel like we’ve wasted our time and energy. Again, a lot of times this keeps us stuck. An example is, again my friend Joel, he didn’t want to feel like, “Well gosh, I just wasted six years of my life.” Really, that’s a distortion. That’s not an accurate way of thinking about things. A lot of times that’s how we feel. We feel like, “Well, I’ve wasted all this energy on this project, or I wasted all this energy on this relationship that isn’t working out,” then we don’t want to give it up. Think anybody who’s played Farmville or one of those games on Facebook, understands that desire to keep with a project that maybe isn’t all that fun anymore, because you don’t want to feel like you wasted your time and energy. It makes it really hard to walk away from that situation.

Let’s talk a little bit about what happens with our brain when we go through a change. This goes back a little bit to why it’s easier for children to go through change and to make adaptations. It’s called “neuroplasticity.” It’s about what biologically happens in your brain when you learn a new skill. If you can think of any skill you’ve learned, whether that was learning to ride a bike, or drive a car, or maybe play an instrument, what happens with your brain is as you do something over, and over, and over, it’s a little bit like hiking a path up the mountain. That path gets worn down; it’s very easy to follow. That’s what happens with your brain. If you do something over and over those connections in your brain, that path is made for you, so then it’s really pretty easy to follow.

The problem is that then when you try to change that habit or change that behavior, it’s like blazing a whole new trail. It’d be like if you decided to hike up this mountain on your own with no trail. You’re going to go through the brush, you’re going to go through the trees, you don’t know what kind of things you’re going to encounter and it’s going to be pretty hard, especially the first few times. But as you do something over and over again, and you stop doing the old way of doing things it’s sort of like if that original path if you stopped using it, nobody went on that path anymore, it becomes overgrown. Then the new way of doing things as you do it over and over again then those connections in your brain are formed and it feels like second nature.
Again, if you learn how to drive a car, when you first get in the car, you really had to think about where everything was. “Gosh, the gas is on the right. The brake is on the left.” You had to think about all of those little things, and now chances are you probably don’t even have to think about it. It’s just second nature.

We can categorize change into four different categories.

The first is, “I can’t wait to change.” That’s any kind change that’s really exciting. It could be a move, it could be getting married, having children, a promotion.

“I know I have to” change is maybe change that you didn’t necessarily seek out, but now you’re presented with it, and it doesn’t look so bad, but you’re still a little bit afraid of it.

“Please don’t make me do this change.” Those are really those changes that are thrust upon us. Maybe it’s a change in our workplace and the organizational structure, or maybe we have to look for a new position because maybe your position is going to be ending, that kind of thing.

“Where do I start changes.” Really that change that happens very suddenly and it can feel really overwhelming. That can be a sudden loss in job or employment status. It could be the loss of a loved one suddenly. Depending on what kind of change you’re going through you might feel like one of these responses to that situation.

When we talk about the phases of change we can liken them to the seasons.

The first season that we go through, that first phase, is a lot like autumn, it’s a lot like fall time, because we’re still really pretty comfortable in our old way of doing things. This is the time where really we have to first start saying goodbye to the old way of doing things, to our old relationships, that kind of thing. This is that time where you really have to start breaking your old patterns, say goodbye to the old way of doing things. This is a great time to reflect about how you feel about your old ways. It’s okay to have negative feelings during this time. Just be aware that avoiding the negative feelings might not be helpful. Instead kind of the only way to get through it is to go through it. Just acknowledge those feelings as they come up.

Now, the next season of change, the next phase, is a lot like winter. During this time this is really that hardest part of change. This is where we kind of feel confused, we feel sad, we kind of feel really resistant to the change and find ourselves maybe pushing back. A lot of times this is where we feel kind of angry and we’re grumbling, we might be angry at the situation. This is really a time to learn about yourself and to seek support from others.

During the next phase of change we’re starting to come out on the other side. We’re starting to let go of the old way of doing things. We’re starting to feel much more comfortable with our new way of doing things, so our new situation. We’re starting to explore our surroundings in a
more open-minded way. We’re feeling much more comfortable and excited and interested in what’s going on.

Then our last phase of change is kind of our summer of change. This is where we feel really much more comfortable with the situation that we’re in and our new situation. We have a much more clear sense of the future. We have a much clearer sense of what we’re doing. A lot of times we feel much more capable. We see the benefit to change. We’re able to look back and recognize that we’ve really gone through some growth during this change process.

At this point, if you are going through the change with others recognize that you may have gone through change at a different pace than others. They might already be at this phase before you, and others might be at the phase behind you. If others are still going through what you’ve been through this is a great opportunity to help them navigate it.

Let’s talk a little bit about locus of control. What we know is that really in our lives there’s not that much that we have control over. The things that we have the most control over are ourselves. Really, that’s about it. Actually we don’t really have control over too much else after that. That is why the circle that says, “in control” here is the smallest because we just really ultimately don’t have that much control over things in our lives. The thing is that once you’re able to hone in on those things that you have control over, you can feel much better and you can feel much more empowered and find yourself be much more successful.

I think a really great example of people who have really keyed into this are professional athletes, because there are lots of variable and lots of factors for professional athletes. They are really great at focusing in on the most minute details, like their stance, how they hold the ball, how they’re breathing, how they’ve practiced, how they’re eating, how they’re working out, those kinds of things. Even just their rituals for getting ready. I think a lot of times that’s why athletes seem like they’re really superstitious people because they are very rigid about their routines and how they get ready for things, but those are the things that they have control over and it really makes them much successful.

Now the next circle of control is that dotted circle. That’s are influence circle. Those are things in our immediate environment that we can influence. The reason that circle is dotted is because it sort of expands and contracts in our environment. A great example of this is if you are a parent, children … “My biggest fear is my children will someday realize that I have no control over them.” The thing is I don’t. I don’t have control over them, but I can influence them. I can institute consequences, that kind of thing. Those are things in our environment that we can influence, like who do we chose to be around, that kind of thing.

Then of course the biggest circle are those things that are outside of your control. It’s like traffic. If there was a car accident on your way to work, you don’t have control over that. If there is an economic meltdown, you don’t have control over that. So when we spend a lot of
our energy focused on these things outside of our control, it’s really a waste of our energy. So really focus on the things that you can control and you’ll find that you’re much more effective.

Here’s the thing, when it comes to change whatever you’re feeling is the right feeling. There is no right feeling when it comes to change. Emotions are not necessarily good or bad. I think a lot of times we label our feelings as being either good or bad, but they’re just our feelings. When your feelings come up acknowledge them, recognize them, maybe label them, and give yourself permission to freak out a little bit. You don’t want to go over the top. Give yourself permission to feel the anxiety and to feel the sadness and feel all those feelings that you’re going through.

When it comes to coping with change really the biggest step, and the first one, is to accept the reality of the change. A lot of times we kind of go through a stage of denial when it comes to a big change. Then accept that this change is really stressing you out. Again, that’s okay for it to be stressing you out, and expect it and acknowledge it.

I think a great way of coping with change is to think of the change as being like a software upgrade for your brain. It’s just like if you’ve ever worked out, and ever lifted weights; you can’t just lift three pound weights for years and years and years. At some point you’re going to have to challenge yourself and go up to five pounds, and eight pounds, and up and up and up, because you want those muscles to grow and to develop, otherwise you’re really just spinning your wheels. You’re not getting anywhere. When you challenge yourself it should feel uncomfortable. That’s just kind of like upgrading. You’re just upgrading yourself.

You also want to look for support. And not all support is created equal. So look for people who are really going to encourage you, who are going point out the positives, who are going to let you vent without judging you. Then if you’re freaking out, schedule a time to freak out. Freak out at home, freak out with your friends, go out with them and vent. Set a time limit on that so you’re not just stuck in this venting, venting, venting place. You really want to start moving forward through those phases of change.

Here’s some final thoughts. Remember, that change takes courage and that when it comes to change there’s always some kind loss. You’re letting go of an old situation, and an old way of doing things, maybe an old relationship. Remember that on the other side of that loss is freedom. I think that this is a really great quote, and so we’re going close with this. It’s from the television show “Community.” Remember that, “Don’t be afraid of the future. After all, the present you’re clinging to was once the future.” I think that that’s really a pretty good quote about change.

If you haven’t already, contact your human resources department and they can point out to you some of the different benefits available to you through your employee assistance program, and they can include anything from individual counseling to legal and financial services, as well as local work/life resources and support.
Thanks again for attending our recorded webinar today. I hope you enjoyed it. I encourage you to check some of our other recorded webinars. Thanks and have a great day.