



Change ... Our Constant Companion

I am often reminded of a comment from a friend, who said that we only move towards change when it is too painful not to!

If there is one thing we can count on, it is that we, as people, will experience change — whether it is a planned change, such as marriage, a change in vocation, or a move, or an unanticipated change, such as the terminal illness of a loved one, a job loss, or a traumatic injury from a car accident.

The changes that we experience also affect our interpersonal relationships with loved ones, such as our partner, our child(ren), our parents, and even our friends. Change can affect how we relate to others.

In a therapeutic relationship, change may be conscious and focused as clients work towards goals they have set with their therapist. These therapeutic goals are in the context of their life, environment, and interpersonal relationships.

Christensen, Russel, Miller, and Peterson conducted research about the process of change in couples therapy. They defined positive change experienced by clients as an increase in relationship satisfaction in the three areas of affect (feelings and emotions), cognition (knowing), and in communication.

They published their research in the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* in 1998 (see our box *For Further Reading*). In couples therapy, better communication with their partner was highlighted by clients as an important factor in the change process.

Additional factors they noted included clients' experience of fairness and hope, safety and rate of pacing in therapy, and clients' experiences being normalized by the therapist.

Changes can be small or incremental, and change experienced in one area of life can affect other areas as well. Recognizing and accepting the necessity of change can give the necessary motivation to create change.

In a therapeutic process of change, a therapist is a 'respectful' listener, creating space for a client or clients to create new meanings in their life.

The therapist can also be an important facilitator in creating and framing an attitude of hope for clients, as they seek both to understand their experiences and themselves and to move towards the hard work of actually making changes.

One of my clients shares her thoughts on change:

"most of life is change and transition and learning to navigate it....If I am on the path, life will change and life is about being on the path. It isn't easy, and it takes support, learning to ask for help from others like your partner. It always comes back to understanding and validating each other and oneself and to not allowing yourself to become isolated...."

Change, while difficult and frequently challenging, can be an opportunity for individuals, couples, and families to experience hope and find new meaning.

As studies show, change can be supported by the respectful support, care, and encouragement from a consistent other, such as a therapist, pastor, or even close friends, who can accompany us on our journey of change.

Through this journey, change can be embraced, whether planned or unplanned, and along the way, we may find new meanings in ourselves, in our relationships with others, and in our life circumstance.

We, as therapists at IFL, consider it a sacred privilege to accompany our clients through the stages of change: whether it is loss or grief, new beginnings, relocation to a new place of employment, the beginning of a marital relationship, a transition to a new stage in the family life cycle of parenthood, the adjustment of children leaving the family home (empty nest), widowhood, or even plans for retirement.

Clients can re-imagine their lives and see their crisis or circumstance become opportunities for personal growth, with perhaps even broken or severed relationships renewed and restored.

The therapeutic relationship, while holding out possibilities for change, can help a person or couple or family to catalyze a new vision, which in turn releases the creative energy of compassion and hope.

As a therapist, I am truly encouraged and inspired by my clients as they have taken steps and moved towards change, particularly in the midst of many unknowns, fears, and uncertainties. Their courage inspires me and creates a hope that change is possible for us all!

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For Further Reading:

Christensen, L.L., Russel, C.S., Miller, R.B., and Peterson, C.M. The Process of Change in Couples Therapy: A Qualitative Investigation. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 24 (1998): 177-188.



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