



## Dealing with Unexpected Change: e.g. the coronavirus outbreak

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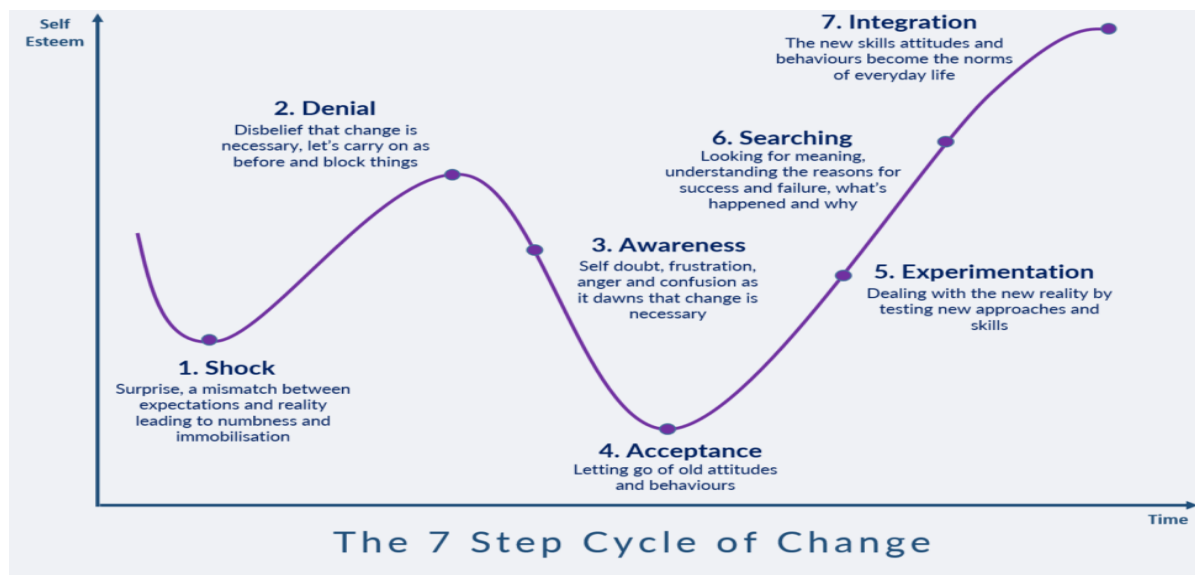
Because the coronavirus has turned everything upside down throughout the world, I am going to deviate from my usual once a month newsletter and send one out with info to help you during lockdown every week. This week I will talk about dealing with unexpected change. In the newsletter next week I will talk a bit more about how to cope with unexpected change, and following that how to build resilience to unexpected change.

Every now and then life throws us a curved ball. And sometimes it is one hell of a curved ball. For many people the coronavirus is just such a change. There are business owners wondering what they do when there is no business or income for weeks on end. There are people who were retrenched just prior to the coronavirus shutdown who are reeling from a double blow; the retrenchment and the virus. There are people wondering if they will be retrenched when eventually they can go back to work. Some people have cancer and are undergoing painful and extreme treatment and hoping no one with the virus comes anywhere near them. Very social and extroverted people are battling with the isolation, despite everything that can be done with technology. The coronavirus is one example of unexpected change. I don't think anyone put together a business or personal plan at the end of last year or the beginning of this year taking the coronavirus into account. We had no idea this was coming. It just hit us out of the blue and threw our lives into confusion and chaos and fear.

Unexpected change can do that. The unexpected change doesn't have to be the coronavirus. It could be an unexpected retrenchment. It could be that your employers go bankrupt. It could be that you are suddenly given a cancer diagnosis. It could be that a very close family member suddenly dies. It could be that your spouse asks for a divorce out of the blue. Unexpected change can be truly awful. It throws our lives upside down.

In talking about how to deal with unexpected change, I am going to make reference to what is called "The Emotional Change Cycle". This gives the stages that people go through when dealing with change. We don't always go through all the stages, and we don't follow the cycle in order as people are all different, however,

understanding the cycle, and what to do in each stage, can help you navigate your way through unexpected change. It can also help you understand that what you are experiencing is normal, and you are not some freak who is losing the plot.



### Stage 1 : Shock

This occurs when you first hear the news. Because the change is unexpected and so contrary to what you expected you literally shut down your mind. You can feel like you are having an out of body experience. Some people can almost imagine themselves outside of their body looking down at themselves. The shock usually means not much information sinks in, and consequently you will need to get the information when you are not in shock any more. Numbness and immobilisation are also commonly experienced when in shock. In this stage there is such a disconnect between what is happening and your expectations that you just cannot take it in.

If you are in shock then get yourself to a safe place and stay put. Talk to people if you need to. Eventually you do need to talk so the reality of what is happening can start to sink in. This is the time to ensure you don't do much, and especially don't make big decisions.

### Stage 2: Denial

Some people go straight into denial without going into shock. Some people may skip this stage. As I said the journey differs a lot from person to person. Sometimes you can even be further along the cycle and then go back to denial. Denial occurs when we hear about the changed situation and we refuse to believe it's true. For example, we may believe we cannot get the virus. Or we may believe the virus is not a problem and most

people will not get ill. Denial can also extend to denial of data and facts. Denial happens because people just cannot accept the news of the changed situation. They are not being difficult, they simply do not have the means to deal with the news and so the only way to deal with it, is to deny it. When people are in denial they carry on as before. Their beliefs and actions are the same as always. They may also deny the changed situation vehemently to everyone they come into contact with.

There are several things you can do if people are in denial. One is to provide information more slowly and gradually. Another is to build the coping skills of the person, so that they feel they can deal with the change, which will then make it easier for them to accept it.

### **Stage 3: Awareness**

This stage usually includes lots of emotions. In the typical Kubler-Ross Grief/Bereavement Cycle, this stage includes anxiety, anger, bargaining and sadness/depression. It is quite normal to go through all these emotions. None of them are bad emotions. Anger, sadness, and anxiety are normal. They become problematic if you stay there. You will most likely move back and forwards between these emotions as well. One day anxious, the next angry, the next sad and so on. You can even feel all emotions in the same day. In previous newsletters I have written a lot about how to deal with anxiety, anger and sadness/depression during change, as well as the other stages in the diagram above. They are on my website ([www.lifecoachingbusiness.co.za](http://www.lifecoachingbusiness.co.za)) under the newsletters tab if you want to read more about how to deal with each emotion and stage, and start from the December 2013 newsletter through to July 2014.

During this stage you are also likely to experience a lot of self-doubt, confusion and fear. The result of all this emotional upheaval is that you come to gradually accept the change. So don't get fed up with yourself because you are emotional. You are supposed to be. This is the normal process to go through in order to accept a changed situation. The emotions are necessary to get you to the point of acceptance. And once you have accepted the situation you can move forward and get it to work for you.

### **Stage 4 : Acceptance**

At this stage, we accept the change. This is not necessarily a once off moment. You may waver between acceptance and non-acceptance for some time before you totally accept what has happened. At this point, you realise there is no going back. And you start to let go of old beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Let me at this point say, that if the changed situation is not too threatening, or too unexpected, or perhaps even positive, it's possible to come to acceptance quite quickly. But that is not always the case. If the change appears threatening or is very unexpected or appears to have a very negative impact on you, it can take quite some time to get to acceptance. AND THAT IS OKAY. It is normal. There is nothing wrong with you. The cycle of

stages is normal. Moving through them all and back to some again, is normal. The problem comes when you get stuck and stay for months and years in one stage. Then you need professional help.

### **Stage 5 : Experimentation**

Okay, so once you have well and truly accepted that the situation has changed and it is not going back to what it was, you need to start learning to live with the new normal. And by live I don't mean just survive. I mean learn to thrive in the new normal until it is not the new normal it is just normal. The first thing to do after accepting a changed situation is to explore – explore yourself, explore interests, explore your career options, explore your hopes and dreams. Don't settle too quickly on a set way. Use this time of change which has disrupted your life to explore and experiment. If you have to change aspects of your life, then try out some things to see what works best for you. You could have quite a lot of fun in this stage if you are okay with trying out new ideas.

### **Stage 6 : Searching**

This stage is about processing what happened, what you have been through, and finding meaning in the unexpected change. It could also be quite an emotional time for you. Finding meaning in what happened can be at different levels. It may be coming to understand why the whole change took place. Sometimes things happen randomly and sometimes people are cruel and spiteful, and this may be something you need to come to terms with. You may have to change your beliefs about the world. If you believe good things happen to good people you may need to change your beliefs when you see that bad things also happen to good people. Some people even find meaning on a deeper level. MADD – Mothers Against Drunk Driving – was started because of the loss of a child to a drunk driving accident. Some people even use their traumatic change to try and make the world a better place.

You need to go through this stage otherwise you could find yourself relapsing into self-pity and bitterness, which will just hold you back instead of allowing you to move forward into something much better. Some people find they need some professional help in dealing with this stage too. It can take some time, and hard and heart work to move through this stage.

### **Stage 7: Integration**

In the final stage you are now settled into the changed situation. The new normal is now the normal. You have the new skills, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in place to allow you to thrive going forward in the changed state.