

Value of liminality

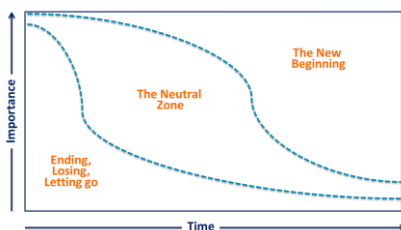
Understanding liminality, its significance within our life transitions and how we can embrace it



Transitions have a natural form

Whilst we experience external changes within our lives, for example: beginning new roles, moving into new homes, starting new relationships, we undergo an internal reorientation to that external change, our own transition (Bridges, 2004: page 4).

Under closer inspection such personal transitions follow a natural order or sequence comprising three phases: endings, neutral zone and new beginnings:



Each phase has a value to us and with it a range of emotions can be engendered. Whilst the ending of the previous way of being can bring about a sadness or lethargy within us, it can help us to let go of the past. Although we can often feel lost and disorientated before our new way of living has become clear, this neutral phase can help us to recuperate and gain insights.

Finally our new beginning can generate excitement, enabling us to create a new life based on insight and renewed energy.

Given this level of personal shift and evolution, it is perhaps unsurprising that transitions take time to fully experience.

Why understanding transitions is important

However, do transitions matter?

In particular, career research shows that when experiencing role changes, 70% of business leaders agree or strongly agree that success or failure during the transition period is a strong predictor of overall success or failure in the job (HBR, January, 2009: page 47).

Moreover, given their natural complexity and that most career transitions are reported to last up to 3 years in duration (Ibarra, December 2002: page 45), this would suggest that transitions need to be understood and managed.

Given that change will happen in our lives and that change is the norm, we will need to develop ways of dealing with

change and our internal transition productively (Bridges, 2004: page 5).

“The transition shape is so essential to growth that we must learn to recognise it in our lives.”

Dr William Bridges (Transitions, 2004: page 175)

Liminality is inherent within our transitions

So what is liminality? Exploring the neutral zone further, this phase can be also termed liminality, where limen in Latin, means threshold. Whilst liminality has anthropological roots when describing primitive society's rites of passage, it has subsequently been applied into a broader range of life transitions (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010: page 15).

This period of liminality refers to the transitional period between the ending of a phase and the beginning of a new beginning and with it the opening of new doors. For many of us, this intermediate phase can be experienced as isolating (Van Gennep, 1960: page 186) and challenging. Such difficulties are

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perhaps a consequence of its structural and physical invisibility alongside its cultural complex nature (Turner, 1967: page 102).

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This period of liminality is a very important time which we need to travel through slowly for our transition to be successful.

It is a time of recuperation; undertaking transitions takes energy as it is a time of personal regeneration (Van Genneep, 1960: page 182):

“The neutral zone is a time when the real business of transition takes place. It is a time when an inner reorientation and realignment are occurring.”

Dr William Bridges (Transitions, 2004: page 154)

Through this intermediate phase we will be receiving signals from our intuition; these will be important cues to inform the building of our next phase of life. Our new sense of self and life will gently emerge.

Moreover this period of liminality is a prime time for us to experiment with possibilities and play with new ways of being. During this temporary phase we can trial new identities without fear of reprimand. It is an opportunity to learn.

How is it best for us to embrace liminality?

During this in-between phase where the form of our old life has

broken down and our new life is yet to emerge, it can be a time of emotional discomfort for us. However, for us to gain the value of liminality it is important for us to savour and not rush:

“Liminality provides an opportunity for self-transformation.”

Dr William Bridges (Transitions, 2004: page 135)

1. **Give in to the emptiness** – surrender into liminality and stop struggling to escape it. The gap between the old and new is good. This process of disintegration and reintegration is a source of our renewal
2. **Find a regular time and place to be alone** – whilst this can be challenging in today's world, find ways of being alone and away from distractions. Slowing down and just being will help us to recharge and allow us to tap into our intuition
3. **Begin a journal** – reflecting and noting what occurs to us can be a practical way of capturing our thoughts. In time out of the blur of personal experiences, shapes will start to emerge
4. **Go on journeys** – take time away from our day-to-day life and go on personal journeys. Let the journeys unfold and take on their own form. Don't plan and constrain by structure
5. **Daydream** – allow ourselves to just be and consider. Notice those thoughts that drift through our minds. Take note of hunches, coincidences and crazy ideas

It is important to stay within this phase of liminality for a while.

We will know that this neutral zone will be over when our new beginning emerges and we are energised and ready to make move forward.

Top tips



During this time of self-transformation invest more time with people who will help us to see ourselves for who we are becoming rather than hold us back in the past

Consider which new communities we can join to help us to develop and grow into who are we becoming

Create a story to help you to make sense of your transition. Crafting narratives can be powerful ways to sustain feelings of authenticity and close gaps between the old and new



About the writer

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Cathy Brown is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist, consultant and author. She runs Evolve Consulting Services Limited which works with individuals, teams and businesses to manage transition and change.

She works as a transition coach and a career counsellor with individuals and teams. She is also a guest lecturer at Nottingham University Business School. In addition, Cathy is a founding trustee of the Evolve Transition Trust, which supports disadvantaged people through life transitions.