

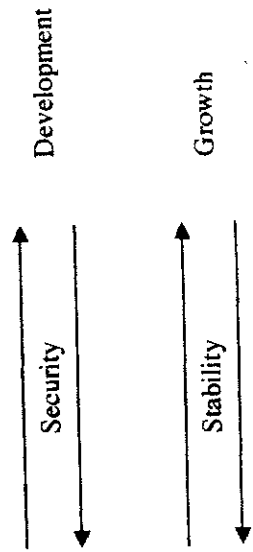
## COPING WITH CHANGE: AN ADLERIAN MODEL

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In Chinese, the word for *change* has several synonyms: among them are "fear", "stress" and "excitement". Almost every change, good or bad, is followed by feelings of stress. The question is how to cope with change and overcome fear of what may be experienced as paralysing distress (Shifron, 2006).

Adlerians understand change to affect the person holistically. Within this paradigm, change is experienced physically, emotionally, cognitively and spiritually. It helps to conceptualise change as movement: if we think about walking, about taking one small step, the action requires shifting the body's weight to one leg. Only when one leg is stable can the other leg move forward. Without the physical, emotional and cognitive state of stability, there will be no forward movement. In a sense, this movement occurs in all of life's tasks. We can think of this balance in movement as necessary for *homeostasis* (Shifron 1999).

Homeostasis is the organic equilibrium that serves as a foundation for individual development, growth and maturity. In this sense, security and development as well as stability and growth have recursive relationships that can be diagrammed in the following manner:



Just as coping with change permeates the other life tasks, successful resolution of the personal, social, occupational, intimacy and existential tasks augments the individual's sense of security, stability and confidence in self and in significant others. It is this security and stability that grounds individuals and prepares them for the next experiences of growth and development.

A child develops confidence when there is at least one adult to encourage new strengths and abilities. This enables the child to grow into a confident person. An adult needs the same kind of security within the couple relationship in order to feel confident and to grow in the world of work and among friends. The worker looks for a mentor and a supportive environment to enable the process of risk-taking. The courage to take risks allows the person to actualise the creative abilities. People who contribute creatively to different parts of their life systems tend to experience real meaning in life (Shifron, 1999).

When unexpected changes occur, when a foreign element throws the person into momentary chaos, a sense of security in self and others enables that person to cope with the demands of the situation. Those who experience the crisis of unemployment, for example, and yet who receive the full support of their family and friends, will weather the misfortune far more easily than those who feel isolated, alone and desperate. In such situations, crisis often serves as an impetus for change and for personal growth and development.

The following is an Adlerian model for effectively coping with change. The model is a holistic one and is designed to facilitate movement through chaos and into new possibilities and eventually a new integration. This delineation of the fifteen factors in effective change can be described in a list from base A (acceptance) to G (growth). This step-wise model is designed for parents, teachers, therapists and every individual.

**A** stands for *acceptance* of self and others. A necessary condition for growth is the ability to fully accept self without destructive comparisons with others. This is the foundation for getting along with oneself, and it enables us to look outward, to accept and respect others in our life.

**A** also stands for paying *attention* to the process of change, not just goals and desired outcomes. Attending to the process actually enables the reaching of goals. And paradoxically, excessive attention to goals often prevents people from reaching them.

**B** stands for *believing* in self and in others. Such belief is intimately connected to optimism and the experience of faith. When individuals believe in themselves, they are able to explore and access internal resources that have always been part of them. They are also able to ask for help and to receive the gifts of external resources that are available in a life connected to others. The analysis of early recollections is here essential in order to encourage the belief in one's internal resources.

**B** also stands for *better relationships*, which result from an enactment of community feeling and social interest. People who feel they have a place in this world connect with others and allow others to connect with them. The oldest forms of human survival are enacted when people pull together in times of need. In turn, better relationships provide a foundation of personal confidence and decrease the need for unnecessary conflicts.

**C** stands for *courage, confidence, creativity and contribution* (Lew & Bettner, 1996). Courage extends from self-acceptance, belief in oneself, and the security that comes from better, more meaningful relationships. Indeed, the value of connected relationships in the face of change is like oxygen to life: one cannot live without it. Some people believe that courageous people have no fear. Adlerians know that there would be no need for courage without fear. The two go hand-in-hand. When people feel the

support of others, however, they are not alone, and they are able to put faith and hope in their movement forward. With each step forward, one's confidence builds up. It evolves naturally when individuals pay attention to process more than outcome. It is courage and confidence together that form the foundation for creative problem-solving. In the company of others, creative problem-solving in the process of change almost always requires that each participant make a contribution to the larger whole.

The world of work is based on teamwork. The group's synergy encourages creative thinking.

**D** stands for *decreased attention* to unsuccessful events in life. Paying attention to mistakes, setbacks and the possibility of failure is a recipe for immobilisation. It leads to what Adler (1935/1996a, 1935/1996b) called a retreat from the demands of life. Paying full attention to successes, achievements and accomplishments, on the other hand, makes it possible to mobilise hope and to access internal and external resources that may have seemed hidden in the midst of chaos.

**D** also stands for *departing from old habits* and looking for alternative, new behaviours. This is the most difficult part of the process of change. Old habits are convenient. They are the status quo. As new possibilities arise, it is important to conceptualise responses in a different way, a change in the cognitive map as well as in behaviour. It is in the addition of new activities that old habits eventually atrophy and die.

**E** stands for *experiences*. New possibilities almost always become actualities in experience. From infancy through adulthood, life experiences surround and influence the development of human thinking and somatic motor functions. The demands of a rapidly changing society require continuous adjustments. Since life and change are synonymous, a willingness to experience change prepares people to handle what challenges may come.

Not all experiences generate a positive result, but each new experience tests one's capacity for social interest (Adler, 1938), and provides the individual with the experience of handling new challenging experiences.

**E.** also stands for *encouragement* of self and others. Again, encouragement of self and others follows from having a sense of place in the world, of feeling one is not alone (Dreikurs, 1953). An activation of encouragement in one's life comes from the feeling that "I know I can move with others and let others move with me. I can ask for help when I need it, and I can make a contribution when others seek my involvement in their lives".

**F** stands for *focus* on profit rather than losses. An optimistic focus may not always seem warranted by the facts, but it is simply a useful fiction for approaching the future and for taking account of what one has been worth. This is an essential message when working with people who have lost their jobs or partners.

**F** also stands for *fitting in* with group norms. Fitting in does not mean giving up one's individuality. In all parts of life, people learn to adapt to changes from home to work, and to the larger community. This is also true when a person travels to different parts of the world. There must always be an adaptation to new cultures and the requirements of different nations. In this sense, fitting in is a co-operative dance, a keeping pace with one's partner, and an experience of moving together. It is the basis for new perspectives in life, and it is essential to growth and development. Failure to adapt actually results in a loss of self.

**G** stands for *giving up* resistance to change. A common saying, "This is just who I am," is designed to tell people, "Take it or leave it!" It reflects the all too human fear of change and the risks that life requires. Those who resist change sabotage both their present and their future. If we worry, when we are forty, that we may soon be eighty, we are likely also to worry at eighty that we are no longer forty. In the process, both ages are wrecked.

It takes courage to embrace change, to find a new approach to life and to search for new possibilities. Real *growth*, another G, is about evolution: about *becoming* more than *staying the same* (Shifron, 2003). This is the real joy of the dance of life.

Learning effectively to cope with change is a slow process. Even people who are good at it find themselves stuck from time to time. Change is facilitated when the individual gathers both personal resources and external support, envisions new possibilities and enacts them - even practises them. Change is seldom a fluid movement. Adaptation proceeds in fits and starts. The process includes catching oneself in the middle of a return to old habits and realising that a different response is possible. It takes many enactments before new possibilities become a new integration. Here too the analysis of early recollections enables us to recognise the individual's strengths.

I have described the process of change as movement and noted that an understanding of this movement makes coping more likely. Finally, I have suggested a model for coping with change, which implements Adlerian principles in twelve steps from A to G.

Coping with change and engaging usefully in the process of change are intimately related to individual happiness and development. It enriches life and promotes one's mental health.

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