

Helping Couples Navigate Change

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Transitions are stress points for couples because they are moving out of their comfort zones into the unknown both externally and internally. Key aspects of their lives that once brought stability, meaning, and a sense of identity, such as careers or family, are lost or changed. When they lose a job they invested in or when their full and busy nest suddenly becomes empty, they can feel as though they have lost a piece of themselves. How a couple navigates through change can deeply affect their relationship with their spouse, and transitions can be a wonderful opportunity for healing and growth and for them to deepen their connection with the other. However, many couples need help to make it through successfully. Here are a few guidelines to help couples navigate through life transitions and grow in intimacy. In this toolkit, we will share the story of the Smiths, where Mr. Smith has recently retired.

1

Normalize the difficulty.

Transitions and changes, even changes that are anticipated, are hard. Couples should not be surprised or ashamed by this. They need time and patience with each other as they adjust to their new rhythms, schedules and routines, finances, and community.

In our case study, the Smiths may have been looking forward to the day one or both would retire, but now that the time is here, Mr. Smith is experiencing a loss of identity, loss of meaning, and a sense of uselessness. Life is not the way it used to be. As caregivers, we can let the couple know the adjustment will take time. As we discuss the changes with them, we can help them talk through the stressors in their relationship so they start to view them as understandable and normal. We can encourage them to exercise grace and patience with themselves and each other.

2

Help couples express their grief around the change.

Without judgment for the other, help each person talk about the painful parts of the transition with their spouse. Ask questions such as, “What do you miss about how things were before?” “What has been the hardest part of the new season?” Be aware that, at times, one spouse

may react too positively in their desire to be helpful. Even when one spouse intends to encourage or cheer the other up, the person who is struggling may experience this as invalidating their feelings or minimizing their concerns. This may make them feel even worse and more alone.

Coach the couple to reflect on the discomfort the other may be feeling and empathize with the sense of loss. Help each grieve while being curious about the other's experience, including their sense of lost identity.

If Mrs. Smith says, "This is what you've been waiting for! That job was driving you crazy anyway," help her find ways to relate in a way that works for Mr. Smith. "I can see that retiring is really hard for you and that you're struggling to find a new sense of purpose. You spent so much of your life at this job and invested so much, it must feel disorienting without it. Your days are so different now. What is the hardest part for you?"

3

Explore how their roles are changing.

Their roles, the way they see themselves, and the way they relate to each other may shift. They may also see each other through new eyes. If the majority of their time was previously spent working outside the home, losing that role may bring confusion.

Feeling discouraged, Mr. Smith may ask himself, "What do I do now that I don't work all day long?" The Smiths may both unconsciously reevaluate, "Now that we have so much time together, what do we have in common? Do we have any shared interests?"

As the caregiver, you can be a compassionate third party when these identity and relationship changes feel jarring. Help them discuss their changing roles and remind them of the unchanging aspects of their relationship and in their relationship with God. Process with them how to rely on the unchanging aspects of who they are to anchor them through the transition.

4

Encourage flexibility.

The more couples are open to exploring new ways of doing things, the happier and healthier they will be. Conversely, the more they are tied to the way things always were, the more stressed and unhappy they will feel.

Help couples think through what new roles, routines, and responsibilities they are now managing and how they can work together to carve out new paths and support each other along the way.

For example, with decreased income after retirement, the Smiths may be worried about money. Spend time discussing how they will work together to redefine their budget and plan for their future as they age. What are their fears when it comes to money? Allow them space to think through, "What still works for us in this season?" "What can we give up as our lives adjust?" "What are the non-negotiables for you?"

5

Reframe transitions as opportunities.

Over time, after they grieve the losses, help couples identify new opportunities in their current season. Talk with them about what new things God might be doing that they can embrace. Let them list some good things about this new season of life.

Explore with the Smiths how they can spend time together to explore new and meaningful connections, hobbies, and time for things they were previously too busy for like reading, hiking, traveling, museums, and time for romance, etc.

6

Help couples connect to the larger community.

Their spouse is a gift from God for comfort, love, provision, and joy. However, the other cannot be their sole source of support and understanding. Without a rich and meaningful community, their stressful transitions can feel harder and lonelier to navigate. Help them find more resources and relationships to manage the stress and lessen the pressure they may put on each other.

In session, explore how the Smiths can broaden their social network together and as individuals. Are there nearby community centers that have programming during the day? What gifts and talents can they use in a non-work setting like church or a charity? With their identity more fully rooted in Christ, they can find greater meaning in serving and investing in others.

7

Teach couples to pray for and with one another.

In my experience as a marriage counselor, I find that most couples do not pray for or with each other.

Prayer is a wonderful way of turning toward each other with empathy and support.

Likewise, praying with one another is a way of seeking God together. Teach the couples to turn toward God and each other in prayer for wisdom, strength, and guidance through this stressful life transition. This simple practice helps them connect to the one constant and unchanging relationship: God. He is with them, cares about them, and will help them to navigate whatever life brings. While they are with you, ask them to practice praying for each other at the end of a session.

The Smiths can say to each other, "Neither of us can make this new season feel perfectly okay. Let's turn to God for help finding the structure and stability we are looking for." Teach them to pray for the parts of the change that grieve them and the ones that bring them joy. Over time, have them notice how God moved in the areas where they needed. If the circumstances did not change, help them explore if their feelings shifted as a result of praying. Did it change their peace or confidence? Did it provide encouragement or comfort?