

NAVIGATING A LIFE TRANSITION



*A workbook for anyone in the middle of change —
and not sure who they are on the other side of it.*

—
This workbook is for anyone standing in the gap
between who they were and who they are becoming.



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A note from me to you

Transitions, however small or large, can feel like you're out in the middle of the ocean without a compass to guide you. It can feel daunting, and at times, even scary. What direction am I going in? Which direction is even the right one?

There is a particular confusion that arrives with major life transitions, and nobody quite warns you about it.

You expect the practical difficulties. The logistics of a breakup, the adjustment to losing a job, the upheaval of a relocation, the grief of losing someone you care about. What you don't always expect is the identity confusion. The sense of not quite knowing who you are anymore, now that the role, relationship, career, or future you had imagined has changed, or disappeared.

Our attention naturally turns towards solving the immediate problem, towards what needs to be done next, what decisions have to be made. That's entirely understandable. But it means the impact the transition is having on us often gets overlooked. We can become so focused on navigating unfamiliar terrain that we lose sight of ourselves within it, and miss the deeper questions quietly forming underneath.

Because life transitions are not simply changes in circumstance.

They are often a kind of death.

Not necessarily the death of a person, but the ending of a chapter, an identity, a role, a way of being in the world. The future we imagined. The version of ourselves we had come to know. Something ends, and before anything new has fully arrived, we find ourselves in an uncomfortable space between what was and what will be.

We may feel the urge to rush out of that space as quickly as possible, because we long to get back to certainty. To feel settled again. To know who we are.

Yet in my experience, this in-between place is often where some of the most important work happens.

Every ending holds the possibility of a beginning. Every transition invites us, however reluctantly, to discover something new about ourselves, to grow curious about who we are now that the old map no longer fits, rather than force answers that aren't ready yet.

I know this not only through my work with clients, but through my own life.

For me, transitions have often felt daunting and frightening, particularly the ones I didn't choose.

When my marriage ended, and later when my closest friend moved back to England, I found the ground genuinely shift beneath me. Both had given me a sense of stability and orientation I hadn't fully recognised until it was gone.

But it was leaving my career as a violinist, years later, that taught me the most about what an anchor really is. The violin had been a ballast in my life since a very early age. I had leaned on it far more than I realised. It was not simply my profession. It had become part of my identity. It provided purpose, structure, and a deep sense of continuity. Saying goodbye to that part of my life felt like losing a limb.

When these anchors were gone, I was faced with a painful realisation. I had relied on them far more than I understood.

There were times I felt completely lost, like there was no compass, no rudder. It was deeply disorienting. I wanted to grab onto something, anything, to find answers, because it was so uncomfortable to be with everything I was feeling. My mind went into overdrive, reaching for whatever lifeline I could find outside myself, anything that would let me avoid what was actually happening inside. It was uncomfortable, lonely, and at times deeply painful work.

What I did not realise then, and what I am still learning, in different forms, now, is that these transitions were inviting me into a different relationship with myself.

More recently, I have found myself meeting another layer of transition. Quieter, but no less disorienting. The gradual awareness of ageing. Noticing changes in my body, in my sense of vitality, and in the ways I once moved through life with a certain certainty about who I was becoming. There is something confronting about meeting the limits of an identity as you have known it.

I can feel how quickly I want to move into fixing, into managing, into making it mean something I can resolve. And yet there is also a different movement asking for attention. An invitation to slow down and come back into contact with what is actually here, rather than what I think should be different. To remember what is true in this moment, rather than escaping into what comes next.

Over time, I have come to understand that beneath all of these losses and transitions was something deeper. Life seemed to be asking me to discover a steadiness not built on who I was connected to, what role I occupied, or where I found my security, but rooted in something more internal. Something that does not depend entirely on circumstances staying the same.

I would love to tell you this was a graceful process. It was not. There were stretches of grief, confusion, fear, and resistance, and more than a few moments where I simply wanted things to go back to how they had been. Yet looking back, I can also see that these experiences asked me to grow in ways I might never have chosen for myself.

Many of us arrive believing we need help navigating the transition itself. What we frequently discover is that the deeper challenge is learning who we are on the other side of it. Not who we were expected to be. Not who we had to become to survive. But who we are when an old identity no longer fits, and a new one has not yet fully formed.

If you are standing in that in-between right now, not quite sure which direction is right, I hope this workbook can be a steady companion, something like a compass of your own. It won't hand you the exact way forward. But it can help you know the fear makes sense, that you aren't alone in it, and it can help guide you toward what's actually true for you.

With warmth,

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How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook, with space to write throughout. You can print it and work through it by hand, or use it as a framework for journalling alongside. Some sections will feel more relevant to your particular transition than others. Follow that instinct.

A note before you begin. Transitions tend to produce a strong pull towards resolution, towards getting through the in-between and arriving somewhere stable as quickly as possible. As you work through this book, see if you can gently resist that pull.

The in-between is where the most important work happens.

Contents

- 01 What transitions actually are, and why they are harder than they look
- 02 Meeting yourself with compassion, the ground the rest of this stands on
- 03 The in-between, the space nobody talks about
- 04 When you can't pause, moving through a transition without the in-between
- 05 Identity in transition, who are you when your role is gone?
- 06 Going deeper, the beliefs that make a transition harder
- 07 The grief inside every transition
- 08 When navigating change doesn't go as expected, and what genuinely helps
- 09 Finding the right level of support

SECTION 1

What transitions actually are

And why they are harder than they look

We use the word transition so casually these days that it has almost lost its weight. It sounds manageable, planned even. Something we navigate efficiently and come out the other side of, more or less intact.

The reality feels nothing like that.

Change and transition are not the same thing

There is a distinction I come back to again and again in my practice, the difference between change and transition.

Change is what happens out there, the event, the circumstance, the new situation. Transition is what happens in here. It is the psychological process of adjusting. Letting go of what was, moving through the uncertainty, and slowly arriving at something new.

This is why the distinction matters so much. We tend to treat change and transition as the same thing, planning for the external shift and simply assuming the internal adjustment will follow along behind it. It almost never does.

The external change can happen in a single day, the papers signed, the boxes unpacked, the new title on your email signature. The internal transition can take years. You can be standing entirely inside the new life and still reach, for half a second, for a phone that isn't there anymore, a name that no longer applies, a version of Monday morning that doesn't exist. That mismatch, between the world that has already changed and the self that hasn't caught up yet, is one of the most disorienting things we can go through.

Why chosen transitions can be just as hard

A transition we chose, and wanted, can be every bit as destabilising as one we didn't. That catches a lot of us off guard.

Perhaps you got the relationship, the commitment, the life you had hoped for, and still feel a strange loss for the person you were before it. Perhaps you finished the degree, the training, the thing you spent years building towards, and still feel oddly unmoored now that the structure holding you is gone. Or perhaps you finally left a difficult relationship, for all the right reasons, and still find grief sitting right alongside the relief.

Why? Because the psychological task of a transition, letting go of who we were, sitting with uncertainty, building something new, has to happen regardless of whether we wanted the change. What is different when we choose it is the story we tell about it. What doesn't change is the work underneath.

What is actually at stake

I think transitions are harder than they look because what is actually at stake isn't practical. It is existential.

It was never just the role, or the relationship, or the living situation. It was the self we had built around it, the way a house gets built around a life, room by room, until it's hard to remember what the land looked like underneath it. When that structure comes down, there's no roof over you anymore, no walls to find your bearings by, just open sky, and a question you haven't had to ask yourself in years. Who am I, now that I am not that? What am I for, now that this chapter is over?

Exercise 1 Your transition

Describing it - Describe the transition you are currently in, or have recently been through, as specifically as you can. What has changed externally? How long has it been under way? Was it something you chose, something you didn't choose, or perhaps a mixture of both?

From the outside - Think about the practical or visible aspects of the transition. A role? A relationship? Your health? Your work? Your sense of the future?

From the inside - What has it felt like from the inside, not the practical experience, but the psychological, emotional, or spiritual one? What has felt most disorienting? What feelings have been most present? What has surprised you?

Out of sync - Are there ways in which your inner experience feels out of sync with what has already changed externally? Perhaps the world around you has moved on, but part of you has not.

A gentle reminder - There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

Exercise 2 Change versus transition

What has changed

Using the distinction between change and transition, what has already changed externally in your situation? What is different in your life now compared to before? What has ended, shifted, or begun?

What is still catching up

And what internal adjustment, what psychological transition, is still incomplete? Where is the gap between the world that has already changed and the part of you that has not yet fully caught up?

SECTION 2

Meeting yourself with compassion

The ground the rest of this stands on

Before we go any further, there is something worth pausing on, because it changes how well everything else in this workbook actually works. The way we meet ourselves while we are going through it.

If we are already disoriented, already grieving, already unsure who we are, and the first thing that happens is a flash of self-criticism, you should have this figured out by now, why are you still stuck, then there are now two things happening at once. The transition itself, and the added weight of being under attack from our own mind.

This is why self-compassion isn't a soft add-on here. It is the ground everything else in this workbook stands on. The in-between, the identity work, the grieving, the tolerance for uncertainty, all of it tends to go better from a place of being on our own side than from a place of self-attack.

What self-compassion is not

It is worth clearing up a few misunderstandings, because they are often the reason self-compassion gets written off before it has really been tried.

It isn't self-pity. Self-pity narrows in on our own suffering and loses sight of everything else. Self-compassion holds our suffering as part of being human, not separate from it.

It isn't self-indulgence, lowering our standards, or letting ourselves off the hook. If anything, it is what makes the harder, honest work of a transition possible at all. We can only stay with a difficult question for as long as we can tolerate being with ourselves while we sit with it.

And it isn't positive thinking. Telling ourselves this is fine, everything happens for a reason, when it doesn't feel fine yet, usually just feels hollow.

Self-compassion is simpler than any of that, and in some ways harder. It is the willingness to be on our own side while we are in the middle of something hard, to offer ourselves something close to the basic decency we would offer someone we loved who was going through exactly this.

A short practice for hard moments

This is a practice worth having ready before you need it, and in a transition, there will be moments you need it.

Name it. When we notice we are struggling, we can pause and say, silently or out loud, this is a moment of difficulty. Or simply, this is hard right now.

Remember we are not alone in this. Transitions are one of the most universal experiences a human life contains. Whatever this particular one looks like, we are not the only person who has stood exactly here.

Offer ourselves something kind. A hand on the chest. A phrase, may I be kind to myself right now, may I give myself what I need. There is no one right way to do this. The aim is just to interrupt the automatic self-criticism, even briefly.

Exercise 3 Writing to yourself the way you'd write to someone you love

A different voice

Think of someone you care about, someone you would naturally be gentle with if they were standing where you are standing now, in the middle of this transition. If they came to you disoriented, grieving, unsure who they are on the other side of this, what would you actually say to them? Not the advice, the tone underneath it. Try writing a few lines to yourself, in that voice, about whatever you are carrying right now. It can feel strange at first. See if you can let it stay kind anyway, even if it feels unfamiliar.

SECTION 3

The in-between

The space nobody talks about

With that as the ground we are standing on, the part of a transition that tests it most is the in-between.

Every transition moves through three phases. An ending, where the old structure falls away. An in-between, where we are neither fully in the old life nor fully in the new one. And a new beginning, where a genuinely different chapter starts to take shape.

Of the three, it is the in-between that gets the least attention and causes the most distress, because it is the phase that most resembles being lost.

The in-between brings a particular combination of feelings that can be hard to name. Sailors have an old word for this exact stillness, the doldrums, the belt of ocean near the equator where the wind can vanish for days, sometimes weeks, and a ship simply sits there, sails hanging, going nowhere. It can feel like standing on that same deck from the beginning of this book, except the storm has passed now and there is no wind at all. No panic, nothing throwing you overboard, just flat water in every direction. You keep checking the compass out of old habit, but there is nowhere to steer yet, nothing to steer towards. Just a quiet, persistent anxiety about whether the wind will ever pick up again.

When we are in the in-between, it can feel like something is wrong with us. Like we should be further along, like this flat, waiting quality is a character failing rather than a natural and necessary part of the process.

It isn't.

The in-between isn't a waiting room between the real phases of a transition. It is one of the real phases, the one where the most important work happens, even when it feels like nothing is happening at all.

What the in-between is for

In the in-between, the self we had organised around the previous chapter is being, gradually and often uncomfortably, dismantled, to make room for whatever comes next. Our habits of thought, our automatic assumptions, our sense of what matters and who we are, all of it is in flux.

And that flux, uncomfortable as it is, is the necessary condition for genuine change.

This is why the in-between shouldn't be rushed. Moving too quickly from ending to new beginning, filling the gap straight away with a new role that closely resembles the old one, usually happens because the discomfort of the in-between is too much to bear. The result is a new chapter built on the same underlying assumptions as the last one. Nothing has really changed, because the transition was never actually completed.

Surviving the in-between

The most important thing to know about the in-between is that it is temporary, and that it is purposeful.

The flatness doesn't mean purpose is gone for good. The waiting doesn't mean we're stuck here forever. And the disorientation isn't proof that we're lost, it's evidence that we're between maps, which is a very different thing.

What helps is the slow growth of a tolerance for uncertainty, not its resolution.

That tolerance grows out of the same ground we met in Section 2. Being on our own side here doesn't make the flatness disappear. It means we stop adding self-criticism to an already disorienting phase, and let the in-between be what it is, without also making it mean something is wrong with us.

Exercise 4 Are you in the in-between?

Recognising it

Thinking about where you are in your transition, do you recognise the experience of the in-between? The flatness, the purposelessness, the restlessness without direction, the sense of waiting? How long have you been in this phase?

The pull to escape

What has been most difficult about inhabiting it? And what have you been most tempted to do to escape the discomfort? What quick solutions or premature new beginnings have been calling to you?

Exercise 5 What the in-between is asking of you

The questions it holds

If the in-between is not simply waiting, but the phase in which the most important questions are being held and slowly worked through, what questions does yours contain? What is it asking you to consider that the previous chapter did not require you to look at?

What becomes visible

What is becoming visible, in the space where the previous structure used to be, that could not be seen while that structure was in place?

SECTION 4

When you can't pause

Moving through a transition without the in-between

Everything in this workbook so far has been an invitation to slow down. To resist the pull towards resolution. To let the in-between take the time it needs.

There is something worth acknowledging directly here, because without it, this workbook risks speaking only to those of us whose circumstances leave room for it.

Not everyone has the luxury of the in-between.

For many of us, a transition arrives with no room to pause at all. The marriage ends, and the bills still come. The job is lost, and another has to be found this month, not when clarity arrives. There are children to feed, a parent to care for, a household resting on your shoulders. There is no safety net, no sabbatical, no quiet season in which to fall apart. You have to keep functioning, sometimes at full capacity, while the ground is still moving underneath you.

If this is where you find yourself, I would like to share two things.

The first is that the invitation to inhabit the in-between, to not rush, was never meant as another standard for you to fail. If reading it has added a quiet sense that you are doing your transition wrong, too fast, too practically, without enough time to reflect, please set that down. You are not doing it wrong. You are doing what your life requires.

The second is that the inner transition is no less real because you cannot stop for it. The in-between is a psychological phase, not a period of leave from your responsibilities. You can be moving quickly on the outside and still be deep in the in-between on the inside. The work, then, is not to halt your life. It is to find small ways not to abandon yourself while you keep going.

What this can look like

Compassionate honouring of the inner process when you have no time for it is a different skill from giving it space. It is quieter, and smaller, and it asks for very little, which is precisely the point.

Trade the sabbatical for the micro-pause. You may not have months. You almost certainly have ninety seconds. A breath before you get out of the car, a moment before sleep to name silently, this is hard, and I am in the middle of something big.

Let the reflection ride alongside the doing. The commute, the washing up, the walk to the bus, these are not nothing. Grief and reflection don't always need a dedicated hour. They can travel beside ordinary tasks, if you let them.

Lower the bar from process it to don't bury it completely. You do not need to resolve this now, only keep it from going fully underground. One honest conversation, a voice note to yourself, or even a single sentence written or spoken keeps the channel open.

Protect one anchor, not a whole routine. Not a self-care regime you don't have time for, one thing. Sleep, if you can protect it. A daily walk. One anchor held reliably is worth more than ten attempted and dropped.

Be on your own side about the constraint itself. There is a particular grief in not being allowed to grieve properly, in having to hold it together when part of you needs to come apart. The fact that you cannot pause is itself a loss, and it deserves compassion too.

You will not move through this in the spacious way the books describe. That does not mean you are moving through it badly. It means you are carrying a transition and a life at the same time, which is harder, not easier, and asks for more compassion, not less.

Exercise 6 When you can't pause

What genuinely can't wait

What does your situation honestly ask of you right now that truly cannot wait? Name it plainly. It helps to see the real, unavoidable demands separated from the ones you may have assumed you have to meet.

Where a small pause might fit

Not an hour, not a day. Where, in an ordinary day, are there a few minutes you could reclaim, not to fix anything, but simply to acknowledge where you are? And what is the one anchor you could protect, even now?

What can be set down for now

Which of the larger questions this transition is raising could you consciously set down for the moment, trusting that you will return to them when there is room? What would it feel like to give yourself that permission, rather than carrying them as one more thing you are failing to do?

SECTION 5

Identity in transition

Who are you when your role is gone?

Whether you have had the luxury of the in-between or not, the same question is quietly forming underneath the transition. Who are you, now that the chapter that organised your life has changed?

That is what this section is about.

Identity, the answer to the question who am I, is less stable than most of us assume.

For most of adult life, that instability doesn't show, because the structures that support our sense of self are in place. The roles we occupy, the relationships we inhabit, the work we do, the places where we belong. Strip those away, or change them significantly, and the question of who we are becomes a great deal less settled.

Role identity, and its loss

A significant part of adult identity is made of role. Doctor, parent, partner, executive, caregiver. These are not merely descriptions of what we do. They organise our time, our relationships, our sense of competence and worth, our daily structure, and our story of who we are and what our life is for.

When a major role ends or changes significantly, what is lost isn't only the activity or the title, but the whole scaffolding the role provided.

The particular challenge of a positive role change

When a role ends voluntarily and positively, retirement chosen after a successful career, children leaving home as part of a healthy launching, we often don't give ourselves permission to grieve that loss. We feel we should simply be grateful, or looking forward.

In most contexts, our permission to mourn a loss depends on the loss being unwanted. When it was chosen, or nominally positive, the mourning tends to go underground, which doesn't make it any less present. Only less acknowledged.

This is exactly the kind of moment self-compassion was built for, not the dramatic crisis, but the quiet loss nobody, including us, gave permission to feel. Being on our own side here can be as simple as letting the grief be real, without needing it to make sense to anyone else first.

Rebuilding identity from the inside out

The question of who we are on the other side of a major transition isn't answered by finding a new role to replace the old one.

It is answered, more fundamentally, by a slower process. Rediscovering, or discovering for the first time, what we actually value, what genuinely matters, who we want to be, independent of the roles and structures that used to answer those questions for us.

In my practice, what separates the transitions that go well from the ones that stay stuck isn't speed. It's whether the in-between space gets used to actually ask the questions it's raising. Who am I, independent of what I do? What do I value, as distinct from what I was valued for? What kind of life do I actually want to build, now that I am building it consciously, rather than arriving at it by default?

Exercise 7 Who you were in the previous chapter

More than what you did

In the chapter that is ending, or has ended, who were you? Not just what you did, but who you were. How did the role, the relationship, the context, or the structure of that chapter organise your sense of self?

What it gave, and what is lost

What did it give you, in terms of identity, purpose, worth, connection, daily meaning? And what specifically have you lost, or are losing, with its ending?

Exercise 8 Who you are without it

Stripped of the structures

Stripped of the roles, the titles, the relationships, the structures of the previous chapter, who are you? What do you value, independent of what you were valued for? What genuinely matters to you, independent of what your previous chapter required you to care about? What kind of person do you actually want to be, in the chapter that is forming?

Provisionally, without pressure

Write provisionally, and without pressure. You are not looking for the final answer. You are beginning to ask the right question.

SECTION 6

Going deeper

The beliefs that make a transition harder

Sometimes a transition is hard simply because transitions are hard. But sometimes it is harder than the circumstances alone would explain, and when that is the case, it is usually worth looking a little deeper.

In my practice, when a client is more destabilised by a change than the change itself seems to warrant, or when they find themselves stuck in a way they can't quite account for, I get curious about what is underneath. Not what is wrong with them, but what they are carrying, and where it came from.

Because each of us can move through the same kind of change and experience it completely differently. The difference often lies not in the change itself, but in the beliefs we each bring to it. Quiet, long-held assumptions about ourselves, about change, about uncertainty, about what we are allowed to feel.

These beliefs usually operate below the level of awareness. We don't experience them as beliefs. We experience them as simply how things are.

Beliefs that tend to make transitions harder

See whether any of these feel familiar.

My worth depends on my role. On being productive, needed, useful. When the role goes, it can feel as though worth itself has gone with it.

I should be able to handle this on my own. Which makes the reaching out that transitions ask for feel like failure.

Uncertainty is dangerous. Which makes the in-between almost unbearable, and drives the rush to resolve it before its work is done.

I should have this figured out by now. Which adds shame to a disorientation that is entirely normal.

If I let myself grieve, I'll fall apart. Which keeps the grief underground, where it does the most damage.

I am what other people need me to be. Which leaves very little self to return to when the role that defined us ends.

None of these is a character flaw. Every one of them was learned, usually early, and usually for a good reason. A belief like my worth depends on being useful often took root in a childhood where being useful was how love was earned. I should handle it alone frequently grew in an environment where reaching out wasn't safe, or wasn't met. These beliefs were, once, intelligent adaptations. They helped us survive something.

The questions I find most useful here

This is where it helps to turn towards these beliefs with curiosity rather than judgement, rather than trying to argue or scold our way out of them. Beliefs rarely shift under attack. They soften under understanding.

This is self-compassion doing exactly the work it is meant to do here, not excusing the belief, but understanding it clearly enough that it finally has room to shift.

So instead of asking what is wrong with me, the questions become gentler, and more honest. What belief is making this harder? Where did I learn it? What was it trying to protect me from? And is it still true, is it still serving me?

When a belief that has shaped our life for decades is finally seen clearly, named, understood, traced back to where it began, it tends to loosen its grip. Not always all at once. But enough that the transition stops being only something happening to us, and becomes, also, an opportunity. A chance to revise an old assumption that has quietly shaped far more than this one change.

That is often the deeper gift hidden inside a hard transition. It brings the old beliefs to the surface, precisely so that, perhaps for the first time, they can be questioned.

Exercise 9 The beliefs underneath

Naming the belief

What belief, about yourself, about change, about uncertainty, or about what you are allowed to feel, might be making this transition harder than it needs to be? Use the list above if it helps, or find your own words. There is no need to be certain. A guess is a fine place to start.

Where it came from

Where might this belief have come from? What did you learn, and when? Approach this with curiosity rather than blame. You are looking for understanding, not fault. How might this belief once have protected you, or helped you survive something?

Whether it still holds

Is it still true? Is it still serving you, or is it now costing you more than it protects? And if it is no longer the whole truth, what might be truer now? You don't need a final answer. Beginning to see the belief clearly is itself the work.

SECTION 7

The grief inside every transition

Even when nothing has died

One of the beliefs we just named, if I let myself grieve, I'll fall apart, points to something this workbook hasn't addressed directly yet. Grief itself.

Every major transition involves loss, and so every major transition involves grief. This is true even of transitions that are chosen, positive, or long overdue.

The grief inside transitions is one of the most consistently unacknowledged parts of the experience. Which means it tends to go underground rather than being processed, where it quietly undermines the very new beginning the transition was supposed to make possible.

What is being grieved

In a major transition, what is being grieved is usually not one thing, but several at once.

The role, or relationship, or chapter itself. The identity organised around it, the self that was made of that role, and that must now reorganise. The future that was anticipated within the previous chapter, the plans, the assumptions, the taken-for-granted sense of how things would unfold. And sometimes, particularly in transitions that arrive in midlife or later, something larger. The sense of unlimited possibility that begins to close as the chapters pass.

The grief that comes with positive transitions

This is worth staying with, because it is the grief most likely to be dismissed.

Perhaps you retired after decades of a career you loved, and found the relief mixed with a grief nobody warned you about. Perhaps you finally left the safe job for the one you had always wanted, and still lie awake some nights missing the certainty you used to complain about. Or perhaps you moved to the place you had always wanted to live, and still find yourself missing a version of home you can't quite locate anymore.

Giving ourselves permission to grieve a positive transition is not ingratitude. It is honesty, the same on-our-own-side honesty self-compassion has been asking of us throughout this book. And honesty, in a major transition, is the only reliable path to a genuine new beginning.

Exercise 10 What you are grieving

Making the list

Without ranking or justifying the losses, and without deciding which ones you are or are not allowed to feel, make a list of what this transition is asking you to grieve. The obvious losses, and the less obvious ones. The ones others recognise, and the ones that have gone unnamed.

Witnessing one

Then choose one loss from that list, the one that feels most unacknowledged, most carried in silence, and write about it. Not to resolve it. Simply to give it the witness it has not yet had.

Exercise 11 Permission to grieve

What gets in the way

What gets in the way of letting yourself grieve this transition fully? Is it the sense that the loss was chosen, or positive, and therefore doesn't merit grief? Is it the pressure to be resilient, to focus on the future, to keep projecting forward motion?

What would help

Write about what would need to be present, internally or externally, for you to give this grief the space it is asking for.

SECTION 8

When navigating change doesn't go as expected

And what genuinely helps

We don't always move through transitions smoothly or with ease. Not because we lack intelligence or resilience, but because many of the cultural frameworks we inherit around change tend to prioritise speed over depth, action over reflection, and building a new normal over fully acknowledging the ending of the old one.

The rush to resolution

One of the most common patterns is the urge to resolve the discomfort of the in-between by moving into something new before the previous chapter has really been processed.

Perhaps you found yourself in a new relationship before you had really taken in what the last one meant. Or perhaps you filled your calendar again almost immediately, without quite noticing you were rebuilding the same structure you had just walked away from.

None of this is irrational. These are understandable attempts to escape the discomfort of not knowing. The difficulty is that, in moving too quickly, we can miss the very work the transition was asking of us.

Sometimes, though, the pressure to move quickly isn't discomfort we're trying to escape. It's real. We may need income, a place to live, a decision made by a deadline that has nothing to do with how ready we feel inside. When that's true, slowing the whole transition down simply isn't possible, and it would be its own kind of harm to pretend otherwise.

What can still change is the place the decision gets made from. There's a real difference between acting from panic, grabbing at whatever feels fastest just to make the discomfort stop, and acting from a grounded place, even when the action itself has to happen fast. That grounded place doesn't require more time. It asks for a moment, sometimes no more than a breath, of coming back to ourselves with the same compassion we met in Section 2, rather than bypassing ourselves completely to get to the decision faster.

Confusing activity with progress

In a culture that values productivity and forward motion, it is easy to mistake activity for progress.

When nothing is clearly happening, it can start to feel like something is going wrong. This can lead to decisions made too quickly, commitments made to reduce uncertainty, or movement that is more about escaping discomfort than finding direction.

But in transitions, the most important work is often internal and not immediately visible.

Expecting it to be linear

We often assume change will follow a straight line. In reality, transitions tend to move in waves. They loop, return, and sometimes bring unexpected moments of grief or confusion just when things were starting to feel steadier.

When we expect linear progress, it becomes easy to interpret these natural fluctuations as setbacks or signs that something is wrong, when in fact, they are often part of the transition continuing to unfold.

Exercise 12 Where the rush comes from

With honesty, without self-criticism

Which of the patterns described above do you recognise in how you have been approaching your transition so far? The rush to resolution? The confusion of activity with progress? The expectation of linearity? The neglect of your own basic conditions?

The cost, and the alternative

What has that pattern cost you? And what might you do differently?

What genuinely helps

What I find is really supportive is not forcing clarity too quickly, but creating conditions where clarity can emerge in its own time.

This can include a few things.

Naming what is actually happening, rather than how we think we should be coping.

Allowing uncertainty to be present without rushing to resolve it.

Staying in contact with the questions the transition is raising, rather than pushing past them.

Connecting with others who can hold the uncertainty without trying to fix it.

And, very importantly, learning to come back to the present moment when the mind starts to spiral into what if thinking.

This is not about stopping thoughts or forcing calm. It is about not being entirely carried by them.

One way to do this is to gently return to the breath, or to the sensation of being in our body, even briefly, enough to reorient ourselves to what is actually here right now.

Alongside this, small, steady anchors in daily life can help support us through the uncertainty. Routines, movement, time in nature, creative activity. Not as distractions, but as ways of staying connected to ourselves while everything else is shifting.

Connecting in with yourself, a short practice

When we notice our mind moving into what if thinking, or trying to resolve everything at once, we might pause for a moment and come back to ourselves.

Not to stop the thoughts. Not to fix anything. Just to reconnect with the present.

We could try a few things.

Notice our breath as it is, without changing it.

Feel the contact of our body with the chair or the ground.

Bring our attention back to what is happening right now, rather than what might happen next.

And we might also bring a particular quality of attention here, the way we might sit with someone we really care about. Not rushing them. Not trying to change their experience. Just being with them, gently and attentively.

We can offer ourselves that same kind of presence in this moment.

Even a few moments like this can create a small bit of space around the intensity of the mind. The aim is not calm or control. It is simply to remember, I am here, and this moment is here too.

Exercise 13 What you need right now

Not long-term, now

Not in the long term, right now, in this phase of the transition, what do you most need? More space and permission to feel what you are feeling? More connection and witness? More practical structure to anchor the days? More tolerance from yourself for the pace at which this is moving?

One concrete step

Name it as specifically as you can. And then ask, what is one concrete thing you could do this week to begin to provide it?

Closing thought

This is all part of transition.

And often, it is in this quieter space of not rushing, not resolving, and not forcing meaning that something new begins to take shape.

Not because we push it into place, but because we create enough internal space for it to emerge.

This is what gives the space for the answers to come.

SECTION 9

Finding the right level of support

From self-directed work to specialist care

Asking for support in a major transition is not a failure of the self-compassion this book has been building. It is that self-compassion, put into practice. Knowing when to reach outside ourselves is as much an act of being on our own side as anything we do alone.

What you can do on your own

Self-directed work is meaningful and valuable throughout a major transition. The most important of it is honest, sustained reflection. On what is ending, what is being grieved, what identity is reorganising, and what kind of person, and what kind of life, is beginning to form in the space the transition is clearing.

Journalling is particularly well suited to transition work. Its non-linear, provisional, returning-and-revising quality mirrors the non-linear quality of the transition itself.

Reading about transitions, particularly frameworks that map endings, in-between spaces, and new beginnings, can offer a structure that makes the experience more navigable. And maintaining connection with people who can be honest with you is one of the most important resources available.

When a therapist can help

Therapy is particularly useful when the transition has stirred up deeper material that self-directed reflection isn't moving. When the identity questions it has surfaced connect to earlier, unresolved questions about worth, belonging, or self-knowledge. When the grief is more complex or protracted than the circumstances seem to warrant. When the in-between has become genuinely entrenched, or when depression or anxiety has developed alongside the transition.

Internal Family Systems is especially helpful for understanding the parts of you activated in transition, the part clinging to the previous chapter, the part terrified of the uncertainty, the part beginning to sense what the new chapter might hold. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy offers a practical framework for clarifying values and taking committed action. And depth-oriented approaches drawing on developmental and Jungian frameworks can be illuminating for transitions with a more existential quality.

Coaching is also worth naming, because transition work often sits at the boundary between psychological healing and life navigation. As a Certified Executive Coach as well as a counselling psychologist, I work with both, the psychological work of completing the ending and moving through the in-between, and the more practical work of beginning to build what comes next.

When a psychiatrist may be needed

Major transitions don't usually require psychiatric care directly. But when a transition has produced, or coincided with, a significant depressive episode or anxiety disorder that is substantially impairing daily life, psychiatric assessment is appropriate. If sleep has broken down completely, if you are unable to manage

basic daily tasks, or if you are having any thoughts of harming yourself, please seek professional support promptly.

A simple way to orient yourself

Begin with self-directed work if the transition, while difficult, doesn't feel bigger than you.

Consider therapy if something deeper has been stirred up, or what you've tried on your own isn't moving it.

Consider coaching if the ending has genuinely been made peace with, and what's needed now is building forward.

Seek psychiatric assessment if depression or anxiety has taken hold and is significantly affecting daily life.

Transitions are among the most significant experiences a human life contains, not despite the discomfort they produce, but partly because of it. The disorientation, the identity confusion, the grief, the purposelessness of the in-between, these are not the price of change. They are the process of it. And the willingness to inhabit that process honestly, rather than managing or bypassing it, is what makes a major transition something more than a difficult period to get through. It makes it what it actually is, an invitation to become more genuinely yourself. That invitation is worth accepting.

I hope this journey, yours and mine together across these pages, has left you a little more settled in the in-between than when you started. The compass may still spin sometimes, and that's alright. What matters is that you now have enough of a new point of reference to trust the direction you're finding, even before the way forward is fully clear. That was always the most this book could offer, a compass of your own, and the steadiness to keep reading it.

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About Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc

Shelagh MacFarlane is a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. She has lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and works with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, Shelagh had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped her understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of maintaining a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

Her approach

Shelagh works integratively, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. She does not apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. She works with individuals, couples, and families. Her particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

Qualifications and background

- MSc Counselling Psychology — United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma — Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa, and the United States

Get in touch

Shelagh offers a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, to get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and to understand what working together might look like. Sessions are held by video call at times that work across time zones. Every enquiry is handled personally by Shelagh, and treated with complete discretion.

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*Change happens in a moment.
Transition takes much longer.
This workbook will help you navigate both.*



Major life transitions are not just logistical challenges — they are identity challenges. When the role, relationship, or future that organised your sense of self changes, you must reorganise too. This workbook offers a clinically grounded, compassionate guide to understanding what is actually happening during a transition, why the disorientation is not weakness, and what conditions allow something genuinely new to emerge.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  Why transitions are psychologically harder than they look
-  The neutral zone — the in-between space nobody talks about
-  Identity in transition — who are you when your role is gone?
-  The grief inside every transition, even the chosen ones
-  What people typically get wrong about navigating change
-  How to find the right level of support

*Every ending contains the possibility of a beginning.
Every transition invites us, however reluctantly,
to discover something new about ourselves.
Not by forcing answers, but by becoming curious
about who we are now that the old map no longer fits.*

— Shelagh MacFarlane



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20+ years in private practice



Shelagh is a counselling psychologist with over 20 years of experience helping adults navigate anxiety, stress, and life's challenges with compassion, curiosity, and clarity.



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