

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.



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

BCPA Registered (Canada), 20+ years in private practice

A note from Shelagh

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 divorce, the adjustment to retirement, the upheaval of a relocation, the grief of a bereavement. 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.

When a major transition happens, our attention naturally turns toward solving the immediate problem. What needs to be done next. What decisions have to be made. How we are going to cope. This is entirely understandable. Practical realities ask for our attention.

What often gets overlooked is the impact the transition is having on us. We may become so focused on navigating unfamiliar terrain that we lose sight of ourselves within it. Sometimes we are so busy surviving the change that we cannot see the deeper questions quietly forming underneath it.

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. Not by forcing answers, but by becoming curious about who we are now that the old map no longer fits.

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

For me, transitions have often felt exciting, daunting and scary at the same time — particularly the ones I didn't choose.

When my marriage ended, I found myself standing in unfamiliar territory. Later, when my best friend moved back to England, I felt another profound loss. In different ways, both relationships had given me a sense of stability and orientation. They were people I turned to when life felt uncertain. People who helped me feel anchored in the world.

Years later, when I made the decision to leave my career as a violinist, I found myself experiencing something similar. 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, in many ways, like another profound loss.

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 lost. Times I searched for certainty, direction, and reassurance outside myself, because I did not yet trust that I could find those things within. 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.

This is something I witness again and again in my work. Together, we begin to explore what is really happening beneath the surface when everything feels disorienting. Why the confusion and uncertainty are not signs of weakness, but a natural and necessary part of the process. And what conditions allow something new to emerge, rather than simply rebuilding what was there before.

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

If you are standing in that uncertain middle right now, I hope this workbook can be a steady companion — not to rush you through, but to keep you company while you find your own way across.

With warmth,

*Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc Counselling Psychology
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

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 toward resolution — toward getting through the uncertain middle and arriving somewhere stable as quickly as possible. I want to gently invite you to resist that pull as you work through this.

The uncertain middle is where the most important work happens.

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

SECTION 1

What transitions actually are

And why they are harder than they look

The word transition can be used so casually that it has almost lost its weight. It sounds manageable. Planned. Something to navigate efficiently and come out of reasonably intact.

The psychological reality is rather different.

Change and transition are not the same thing

William Bridges draws a distinction I return to often in my practice: the difference between change and transition.

Change is external — the event, the circumstance, the new situation. Transition is internal — the psychological process of adjusting to that change. Letting go of what was, moving through uncertainty, and eventually arriving at something new.

This matters enormously, because we tend to treat the two as the same. We plan for the external change and assume the internal adjustment will simply follow. It rarely does.

The external change can happen in a day. The internal transition can take years. And the mismatch between those two timelines — between the world that has already changed and the self that has not yet caught up — is one of the most disorienting experiences a person can have.

Why chosen transitions can be just as hard

One of the things that surprises some people most is that chosen, positive changes can be every bit as destabilising as unwanted ones.

The couple who longed for retirement, and find themselves, six months in, struggling with purposelessness and friction. The person who chose to leave a difficult relationship, and finds grief mixed in with the relief in ways they hadn't anticipated.

The reason is this: the psychological task of a transition — letting go of a previous identity, moving through uncertainty, building something new — has to be done regardless of whether the change was welcome. What changes when the transition is chosen is the story around it. What doesn't change is the inner work it asks for.

What is actually at stake

Major transitions are harder than they look because what is at stake is not merely practical, but existential.

It is not just a role, or a relationship, or a living situation — but the self that was organised around it. When that structure goes, a fundamental question surfaces, often for the first time 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.

Exercise 2 Change versus transition

What has changed

Using Bridges' distinction: 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

The neutral zone

The in-between space nobody talks about

William Bridges describes every transition as moving through three phases. An ending, in which the old structure is released. A neutral zone, in which you are neither fully in the old life nor fully in the new one. And a new beginning, in which a genuinely different chapter takes form.

Of these three, it is the neutral zone that gets the least attention and causes the most distress — because it is the phase that most resembles being lost.

The neutral zone has a particular combination of feelings that we may find hard to name: a flatness or emptiness where purpose used to be; a restlessness without clear direction; a sense of waiting for something that hasn't yet arrived; and sometimes a quiet but persistent anxiety about whether it will arrive at all.

If you find yourself in the neutral zone, it can often feel as though something is wrong with you — that you should be further along, that this flat, waiting quality is a character failing rather than a natural and necessary part of the process.

It is not.

The neutral zone is not a waiting room between the real phases of the transition. It is one of the real phases — the one in which the most important work happens, even when it feels like nothing is happening at all.

What the neutral zone is actually for

In the neutral zone, the self that was organised around the previous chapter is being — gradually, often uncomfortably — dismantled, to make room for whatever comes next. The habits of thought, the automatic assumptions, the sense of what matters and who you are — all of it is in flux.

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

Which is why the neutral zone 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 neutral zone

The most important thing to know about the neutral zone is that it is temporary, and that it is purposeful.

The flatness is not permanent depression. The purposelessness is not a sign that purpose won't return. The disorientation is not evidence that you are lost in any final sense — it is evidence that you are between maps, which is a very different thing.

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

Exercise 3 Are you in the neutral zone?

Recognising it

Thinking about where you are in your transition, do you recognise the experience of the neutral zone? 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 4 What the neutral zone is asking of you

The questions it holds

If the neutral zone 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 3

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 toward resolution. To let the neutral zone take the time it needs.

I want to stop and acknowledge something directly, because if I don't, this workbook risks speaking only to people in a particular set of circumstances.

Not everyone has the luxury of the in-between.

For many people, 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 that is you, I want to say two things as clearly as I can.

The first is that the invitation to inhabit the neutral zone, 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 neutral zone 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

Honouring 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. Acknowledgement takes almost no time, and it is most of what the inner process is asking for.
- **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. You need only to keep it from going fully underground. Even a sentence — written, said to one person, or spoken to yourself — keeps the channel open.

- **Borrow witness where you can't take time.** One honest conversation. A voice note to yourself. Three lines at the end of the day. Small forms of being witnessed do real work when a longer pause isn't available.
- **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. A single steadying ritual. One anchor held reliably is worth more than ten attempted and dropped.
- **Separate what genuinely can't wait from what can.** Some decisions your situation truly demands now. The larger questions — who am I becoming, what do I actually want — can often wait. Giving yourself conscious permission to set those down for now, rather than carrying them as one more unmet demand, is not avoidance. It is triage.
- **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 5 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 4

Identity in transition

Who are you when your role is gone?

Identity — the answer to the question who am I — is less stable than most people 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. I am a doctor, a parent, a partner, an executive, a 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 is not 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 — the grief of that loss is often not permitted. The person feels they 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 does not make it any less present. Only less acknowledged.

Rebuilding identity from the inside out

The question of who you are on the other side of a major transition is not 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 you actually value, what genuinely matters, what kind of person you want to be, independent of the roles and structures that used to answer those questions for you.

The people I have seen navigate major transitions most successfully are not the ones who moved fastest from one chapter to the next. They are the ones who used the in-between space to actually ask the questions the transition was 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 6 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 7 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 5

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 two people can move through the same external change and have entirely different experiences of it. The difference often lies not in the change, but in the beliefs each person brings to it — quiet, long-held assumptions about themselves, about change, about uncertainty, about what they are and aren't 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 neutral zone 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 you 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 you survive something.

The questions I find most useful here

This is where I draw on what is sometimes called compassionate inquiry — a way of turning toward these beliefs with curiosity rather than judgement. The aim is not to argue yourself out of a belief, or to scold yourself for holding it. Beliefs rarely shift under attack. They soften under understanding.

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 your 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 you, 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 8 The beliefs underneath

Naming the belief

What belief — about yourself, about change, about uncertainty, or about what you're 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 6

The grief inside every transition

Even when nothing has died

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

I want to stay with this, because it is the grief most likely to be dismissed.

The retiring executive who finds retirement profoundly grief-laden. The new parent who longed for a child, and finds the loss of their previous, freer life sitting genuinely alongside their love for the child. The person who left a difficult relationship for good reasons, and grieves it anyway — not because leaving was wrong, but because any significant relationship contains real things worth mourning.

Giving yourself permission to grieve a positive transition is not ingratitude. It is honesty. And honesty, in a major transition, is the only reliable path to a genuine new beginning.

Exercise 9 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 10 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 7

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.

For example, the recently divorced person who begins a new relationship before fully taking in what the ending meant. Or the person who retires and quickly fills their calendar, unconsciously recreating the structure they have just left.

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.

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 11 What you have been getting wrong

With honesty, without self-criticism

Which of the patterns described above do you recognise in how you've 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:

- 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 your body, even briefly — enough to reorient yourself to what is actually here right now.

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

Connecting in with yourself (a short practice)

When you notice your mind moving into “what if” thinking, or trying to resolve everything at once, you might pause for a moment and come back to yourself.

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

You could:

- Notice your breath as it is, without changing it
- Feel the contact of your body with the chair or the ground
- Bring your attention back to what is happening right now, rather than what might happen next

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

You can offer yourself 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 12 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 8

Finding the right level of support

From self-directed work to specialist care

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 Bridges' work on endings, neutral zones, and new beginnings — can offer a framework 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 neutral zone 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 neutral zone, 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, is not substantially impairing your ability to function, and the identity and grief questions it raises feel accessible rather than overwhelming.
 - Consider therapy if the transition has triggered deeper material that self-directed work isn't moving; if the grief is more complex or protracted than the circumstances seem to warrant; if the neutral zone has become genuinely entrenched; or if depression or anxiety has developed alongside it.
 - Consider coaching if the transition is primarily forward-looking — the ending has completed, the neutral zone is resolving, and what is needed is structured support in building what comes next.
 - Seek psychiatric assessment if significant depression or anxiety has developed alongside the transition and is substantially impairing daily functioning.
-

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 neutral zone — 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.

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 — no obligation, no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and understand what working together might look like. Sessions are conducted by video call at times that work across time zones. All enquiries are handled personally by Shelagh and treated with complete discretion.

Free discovery call 15 min · No obligation · shelagh-psychologist.com

WhatsApp +60 17-358 2563

Online sessions Asia · Worldwide · All time zones welcome

Specialties Anxiety · Burnout · Life transitions · Relationships · Expat mental health · Identity

Credentials MSc Counselling Psychology (UK) · BCPA Registered · Certified Executive Coach · IPHM Member

THE SERIES

More in this collection

This workbook is part of a growing series of gentle, practical guides for the difficult parts of being human — each written to be worked through at your own pace, and to meet you where you are.

01 Anxiety

When worry has become the background hum of your life.

02 The Relationship with Yourself

The most important relationship you will ever have — the one with you.

03 Living with Depression

When the colour has drained out, and effort no longer seems to reach.

04 Grief That Doesn't Have a Name

For the losses that come without a funeral, and are grieved alone.

05 Navigating a Life Transition

For the uncertain middle — when one chapter has ended and the next has not begun.

06 The Burnout Workbook

When you are exhausted in a way that sleep no longer fixes.

07 Relationships That Hurt

Understanding the patterns that draw us into painful relationships.

08 Stuckness

When you don't know what's wrong — only that something is.

09 The Addiction Workbook

When the thing that helps has become the thing that hurts.

10 When Someone Dies

A map for grief that has a name, but looks nothing like we expect.

11 The Wounded Child

How what happened in childhood is still shaping your life today.

12 The Anger Workbook

For the person who carries anger — and the person who lives with theirs.

If this workbook has been helpful, you may find others in the series speak to something you are carrying too.

Explore the full collection at shelagh-psychologist.com

*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



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

BCPA Registered (Canada)

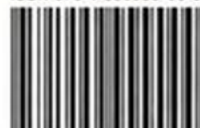
20+ years in private practice



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.

www.shelagh-psychologist.com

ISBN 978-1-999999-00-0



9 781999 999000 >