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A Mindshift & Wellness Guide for Individuals, Families & Educators

Navigating Change and Transition

Introduction: Why Change Can Feel So Hard

Most of us tense up a bit when we hear that change is coming. And our kids are no different.

But, what if change wasn't really the hard part after all? What if, instead, it's more of a 'fall guy' for its partner in crime - transitions.

Here's what we mean: Research, including William Bridge's Transition Model, reveals that the change itself is often not the source of our anxiety, angst and distress. Instead, it's our internal process and reactions to the change (commonly referred to as the 'transition') which can trip us up.

Consider this - A young boy moves across the country to a new school. What might he be feeling? Grief over missing his teachers, classmates, and a familiar neighborhood? Uncertainty over what's to come? Discomfort of starting something new? Anxiety about making friends? Confusion over new expectations, rules and norms? You get the idea.

But let's also not forget the potential positives - Maybe this student is looking forward to a fresh start - a chance to reinvent himself in a new environment. Perhaps he's ready to break out of the social 'box' he's been in previously and is inspired to try new things - a new sports team or club. And how much closer might he and his family, especially his siblings, become with such a big move?

Whether it's moving across the country or simply starting a new school year, shifting to a new classroom, or even transitioning between different after-school activities, making a change can often bring with it a mixed bag of emotions and experiences.




This guidebook is designed to provide you with a deeper understanding of how transitions can impact us and offer practical tips and solutions for more effectively supporting our kids and teens as they navigate life's inevitable changes. Within this guide, we'll explore three common phases of transitions, dissect why change can feel so threatening, offer practical tips for how to support youth through change amidst various developmental stages and much more.

Let's dive in!

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Key Insight:

Change happens to us. Transition happens within us.
Both require attention, **BUT** transition is where the real work and the real growth is found.

Chapter 1: Understanding the Transition Journey

Timing

One of the trickiest parts of the transitional process is that our hearts rarely align with the logistical timelines and pace of the change we're facing.

For example, the feelings surrounding starting college don't just surface on the first day of classes. More commonly, students (and parents) notice feelings bubbling up nearly a year prior - at the start of the student's senior year, when they are often a bit nostalgic about the senior year 'lasts' - last Parent Night, last Homecoming, last game, last performance, etc.

Similarly, it often takes the average university freshman anywhere from a semester to an entire school year to fully adapt to the new academic, social and lifestyle challenges and opportunities of college life. And yet, our human instinct often leads us to frustration and sometimes shame when things don't click together instantaneously.

Recognizing this timeline misalignment is the first step to accepting where we are within the transition process without applying undue pressure to youth to adapt and assimilate to the new environment before they are ready to do so.

Dialogue starters for students navigating change

A helpful way to calm the anxieties of children and teens undergoing transition-induced stress is to affirm what they may be feeling: *"Well, of course, you're feeling ___. Anyone in your situation would likely feel the same way."*

And then, we can reassure them that everyone's change timeline is different and that's ok. A simple assurance of: *"You're exactly where you need to be,"* can help dampen the body's fight or flight response, and allow for a more fruitful conversation where together you can explore any feelings, concerns and even positive emotions that may be surfacing in response to the move.



The Bridges Model: Three Phases of Transition
Research, including the work of William Bridges and associates, has identified a practical framework of three common transitional phases we pass through amidst change.

Let's take a closer look at how these phased transitions align and overlap.

Phase 1: Ending & Letting Go

This phase begins not with the new space, but rather with the loss of the old one. People grieve routines, relationships, identities, and ways of being, even when the change is welcome and positive. **Tips:**

- Don't rush past the loss - acknowledge what is being left behind.
- Expect and normalize each emotion that visits: sadness, frustration, even anger.
- Reflect and honor what was meaningful about the previous chapter.
- Identify and communicate what is changing and what is staying the same.

Phase 2: The Neutral Zone

The old is gone, but the new hasn't yet taken hold. This in-between space is often the hardest - marked by uncertainty, confusion, and lowered confidence. And yet, it can also be the **birthplace of creativity and renewal** if we release expectations and remain curious.

- Name this phase so students don't feel they're "failing" — the disorientation inherent in this phase is normal.
- Create short-term goals and visible checkpoints. This will help them acknowledge little 'wins' which can help fuel further progress.
- Build community and connection to counteract the isolation of the in-between.
- Resist the urge to skip this phase — rushing forward can backfire.

Phase 3: New Beginning

Energy, identity, and engagement begin to unite around the new situation. This is not about simply 'getting used to it.' Rather, it's a genuine psychological reorientation for the **'new normal.'**

- Celebrate small victories and signs of belonging.
- Connect people to purpose. Why does this change matter?
- Reinforce new skills, relationships, and identity anchors.
- Check in, because not everyone arrives at this phase at the same time.

Key Insight:

People move through these phases at their own pace. Two people experiencing the same change may be in entirely different phases at the same time. **Effective support** means meeting each person where they are.

Why Transitions Feel Threatening

Beyond the practical disruptions of change, research consistently points to identity as a core source of transition difficulty. When our roles, relationships, or routines change, our sense of self is called into question.

Cognitive scientist, Dr. Maya Shankar, drawing on behavioral science and her own experience as a violin prodigy whose career-ending injury forced a complete life reorientation, describes this as **"identity paralysis"** - the disorienting suspension that occurs when who we thought where we were is suddenly uncertain.

This is not a weakness. Rather, it's the natural consequence of having anchored our sense of self to external markers - a job, a school, a role, a place - rather than to deeper values and motivations.

Dr. Shankar offers three orienting questions when facing unexpected change.

Ask:

- How might this transition... change what I'm capable of?
- How might this transition... change what I value?
- How might this transition... change how I define myself?

These questions shift the frame from loss to possibility — not by denying the difficulty, but by opening space for what might emerge on the other side.

Chapter 2: Navigating Transitions Well

What the Research Tells Us About Coping

Across both individual and organizational contexts, transition research points to a consistent set of factors that can either help or hinder a person's ability to move through change successfully. These are not fixed personality traits. But rather, they are skills and conditions which can be learned, cultivated and supported. Let's look a bit closer…

1. Emotional Acknowledgment

One of the most reliable findings in transition research is that when we try to suppress or bypass emotional responses to change, we are actually prolonging distress rather than shortening it. Bottling up feelings of anxiety, grief, or confusion leads to burnout and delayed adjustment. Transitions involve real losses. Even when the change is welcome, we're still experiencing an ending, and this experience of loss deserves acknowledgment.

For adults supporting youth through transitions, this means resisting the urge to reassure them prematurely. Saying "You'll be fine" to a child who is grieving a school change, or "Look at the bright side" to someone who is dreading an upcoming change, communicates that their current emotional experience is wrong. A more helpful statement would be: "I understand why you're feeling that way. Tell me more."

2. Realistic Expectations

Adjustment often takes more time than we expect and longer than our organizational timelines allow. Research suggests it may take up to three to six months for students to feel genuinely settled into a new school. Similarly, adults navigating major life transitions frequently report feeling "behind" the pace of others' expectations.

Setting realistic expectations, for oneself and for others, is not about lowering standards. Instead, it's about understanding that adjustment is not a linear process and accepting setbacks as a normal part of the process rather than as a sign of failure.

3. Connection and Support

Social support is one of the strongest protective factors in transition research. A 2021 meta-analysis found that social connection during major life transitions reduced depression and anxiety symptoms by roughly half. And the great news is - it doesn't require a large network of friends. Even one trusted relationship in the new setting can be transformative.

For students changing schools, this means becoming intentional about facilitating connections early on by:

- Encouraging involvement in a club or team,
- Identifying a peer ambassador or buddy,
- And, ensuring at least one adult in the building knows the student's name

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4. Predictability and Routine

The uncertainty of the neutral zone can feel overwhelming. That's where predictable structures can help, as they offer psychological stability. Consistent routines can serve as anchoring habits as they signal safety to a nervous system which is often on high alert. Even small anchoring habits can make a difference. This is especially true for children, whose sense of security is developmentally connected to the reliability of their daily environment.

For students, this might include consistency in: a wake time, a morning routine, or a weekly call with a trusted friend. For educators supporting students in the neutral phase of transition, this could include maintaining consistent classroom structures and communication patterns or even monthly summer check-ins with students in need of additional mental wellness support.

5. Meaning-Making and Growth Orientation

Research in positive psychology suggests that when we can connect our transitions to a larger sense of purpose and/ or to growth, we experience better wellbeing outcomes. This is not the same thing as forcing toxic positivity. Rather, it's about integrating the stories we tell ourselves (and others) around transitions, so we can find a way to make sense of what's happened.

Shankar's three questions offer one framework for this meaning-making. Journaling, therapy, and reflective conversation with someone we trust can also be powerful. The key is that we cannot impose this process of meaning-making onto someone else from the outside. Instead, we must offer the person our patience, support, and an invitation to reflect through a stance of curiosity when the time is right.

Resilience is not the absence of distress.

Rather, it's the capacity to move through distress - with support, with time, and with a story that holds both the difficulty and the possibility. Resilience doesn't always mean 'bouncing back.' Often, it means bouncing forward to somewhere new.




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Practical Strategies at a Glance

Strategy	What It Looks Like
Validate first	Before offering solutions, name and affirm their emotional experience. "That sounds really hard. It makes sense you feel that way."
Maintain structure	Keep daily routines consistent; predictable activities provide stability during large upheavals.
Build connection	Identify one trusted peer or adult relationship in the new context as early as possible.
Mark the ending	Create small rituals and provide opportunities to acknowledge and honor what will be left behind.
Use Shankar's questions	Invite reflection on the child or teen's capacity to grow, their values, and their identity — what might this change open up?
Set checkpoints	Schedule moments to check in with the student on their overall wellbeing, outside of academic progress.
Practice self-care	Promote exercise, sleep, nutrition, and mindfulness as they can all s upport the body through the stress of the transition.
Seek support	When able, offer counseling, support groups, or opportunities for peer conversation as a way to accelerate the adjustment process. Consider inviting an older student who successfully navigated a school transition to share their experience with an individual student or group of students who are new to your school. This can help students feel seen, can normalize any anxieties they may be experiencing, and can serve as an important reminder that they won't always feel this way.

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Chapter 3: School Transitions — A Closer Look

The Emotional Impact of Changing Schools

Changing schools can be one of the most significant transitions in a young person's life. Yet, it's also often one of the most underestimated by adults. Whether the change is caused by a family move, an academic decision, or a developmental progression (from elementary to middle, middle to high school, or beyond), students face simultaneous losses and demands: new social dynamics, unfamiliar physical spaces, different academic expectations, and a disrupted sense of identity.

Ascension Counseling identifies the most common emotional experiences for students experiencing a school transition:

- Anxiety about fitting in and making new friends
- Concerns about academic expectations or different teaching styles
- Fear of getting lost or standing out in a new building
- Grief over leaving favorite teachers, teammates, or routines
- Identity pressure such as shifting from being a "big fish" in middle school to being unknown in a large high school
- Compounding stress from family transitions (moves, separations, new jobs) that coincide with the school change

Children and adolescents process these experiences differently across developmental stages. Here are some common responses:

Young children (under 8)	They often express distress through behavior rather than words. Look out for tantrums, regression, changes in sleep or appetite, and clinginess. It's important to identify behavioral signals rather than waiting for verbal communication.
Preteens (9–12)	Peer acceptance becomes central to wellbeing. Identity and belonging are primary concerns. May appear rude or detached from family while simultaneously needing significant support. Fitting in may feel like survival.
Adolescents (13–18)	Experience intense academic pressure alongside social comparison. Identity experimentation accelerates in this stage. Social media amplifies comparison. May internalize distress or externalize it through risk-taking. Connection with at least one trusted adult remains critical.

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What Research-Based Support Looks Like

Before the Transition

- **Visit the school together —** walk through routes (don't forget the lunchroom), find the bathrooms, locate the office.
- Meet a teacher, counselor, or designated point-of-contact in advance
- Use a "preview" - photos, video tours, or social stories for younger or neurodivergent students.
- Discuss what to expect in age-appropriate terms; invite questions without minimizing concerns.
- Build a coping plan together: calming strategies, a trusted adult to go to, safe spaces in the building.
- ProTip: Due to their budding independence, some older students may bristle at the idea of visiting their new campus with parents or caregivers. If this is the case, invite the family to ask an older sibling, cousin, aunt/ uncle or a family friend to accompany the student on a walk-through.

During the First Weeks

- Encourage the student to join one extracurricular within the first month.
- Maintain consistent check-ins at home. It's important to monitor their mood, friendships, academic comfort and concerns.
- Invite families to communicate with school staff about any concern.
- Ask teachers to be especially attentive and welcoming to new students as they transition.
- Validate both excitement and anxiety without rushing in to "fix" either.
- Monitor for persistent distress: ongoing sadness, sleep disruption, or school refusal.

When More Support Is Needed

- Consider counseling if distress extends beyond six weeks without improvement.
- Involve the school counselor in a collaborative support plan.
- Explore whether underlying anxiety, learning differences, or prior trauma are amplifying the transition.

Pro Tip

Research shows that belonging to even one extracurricular community, team, or club within the first month of school significantly accelerates the sense of **connection** and reduces transition-related anxiety for students of all ages.

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Chapter 4: Supporting Neurodivergent Students Through Transitions

Why Transitions Can Be Especially Challenging

For many neurodivergent students - including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), ADHD, learning differences, or sensory processing differences - transitions present compounded challenges. Where a neurotypical youth may experience a school transition as stressful but manageable, a neurodivergent student may experience the same transition as intensely destabilizing.

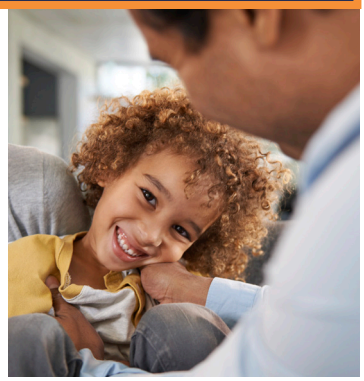
The core reasons for this are rooted in how neurodivergent brains process information and regulate their experiences:

- **Executive function differences:** Planning, flexible thinking, task initiation, and emotional regulation are areas where neurodivergent students frequently need additional support, and yet these are the very skills needed to navigate transitions well.
- **Need for predictability:** Many students with ASD and similar profiles rely heavily on routine and familiar structures to feel safe. Changes to these routines can trigger anxiety, which often may look like defiance.
- **Sensory sensitivities:** New environments bring new sensory demands — fluorescent lighting, hallway noise, unfamiliar smells, which can often be manageable in isolation, but overwhelming in combination.
- **Difficulty inferring cues:** Neurotypical students often pick up on implicit signals that a transition is coming, while neurodivergent students may miss these cues entirely, making the shift feel sudden and unpredictable.
- **Single-focus attention:** Many autistic individuals process the world with intense, focused attention. Interrupting or shifting that focus can be genuinely difficult and unsettling for these students.

Key Insight:

With neurodivergent students, these behaviors are a result of neurological differences, not character flaws. Behavior that may look like resistance or non-compliance is very often a signal of overwhelm and unmet need.



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Strategies That Work

Advance Preparation

The single most powerful intervention for neurodivergent students in transition is preparation — providing structured, predictable, concrete information about what is coming, well in advance.

- **Visit the new school before the first day;** walk the exact route from entrance to classroom to cafeteria to bathroom
- **Meet the teacher or key staff member in advance,** ideally in the actual classroom
- **Request a photo or video tour** if an in-person visit isn't possible
- **Build familiarity gradually;** multiple visits are better than one
- **Share the daily schedule in advance;** practice the morning routine

Visual Supports

Children with ASD and many other neurodivergent profiles process visual information more readily than verbal. Visual supports reduce cognitive load and increase predictability.

- **Visual schedules:** Charts or boards showing the sequence of activities for the day
- **Social stories:** Short, illustrated narratives (pioneered by Carol Gray) that walk the student through an upcoming transition scenario — who they will meet, what will happen, what the expected behaviors are
- **First-Then boards:** Simple two-part visuals showing what comes first and what comes after, supporting cooperation during transitions
- **Visual timers and countdown tools:** Concrete representations of time remaining in an activity, easing the shift from preferred to non-preferred tasks

Consistent Communication and Advance Warning

- **Give explicit verbal warnings before transitions:** "Five more minutes, then we'll clean up"
- **Use activity-anchored cues rather than time alone:** "After one more song, we'll line up"
- **Establish consistent transition routines** that happen the same way each time
- **Ensure all adults supporting the student use the same language and strategies**

Collaboration and Individualization

- **Share strategies between home and school** so approaches are consistent
- **Include the student's voice: ask what helps,** what feels overwhelming, what they need more of
- **Build transition planning into IEPs** and support meetings
- **Involve the team -** therapists, occupational therapists, and specialists in transition planning
- **Use reinforcement -** praise, access to a preferred activity, etc. to support successful transitions

A note on behavior during transitions:
When a neurodivergent student struggles during a transition, the first question should be: "What does this student need to feel safe and prepared?" — not "How do we get compliance?" Behavior is communication. Meeting the need addresses the behavior.

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Chapter 5: Seasonal and Rhythmic Transitions

The Overlooked Transitions: Seasonal Shifts

Not every transition is the result of a dramatic life event. Seasonal transitions — the shift from a structured school year into the openness of summer, or the return from summer back to school both represent recurring rhythms that can destabilize wellbeing in underappreciated ways.

Psychology Today notes that the transition into summer, despite being universally anticipated, often brings its own neutral zone: the loss of routine, the evaporation of daily social connection, and a udden absence of the structure that quietly provided safety and purpose throughout the school year.

For students, especially those who struggle with unstructured time or who lack access to enriching summer programming, this transition can amplify existing vulnerabilities. **For families, summer transitions require proactive planning to maintain wellbeing rather than assuming that the absence of school pressure means the absence of stress.**

Supporting Seasonal Transitions

- **Maintain some structure even in unstructured seasons:** consistent wake times, weekly rhythms, clear expectations
- **Create bridges between seasons:** review what was good about the year ending; build anticipation for what comes next
- **For students returning to school after summer:** begin re-establishing routines one to two weeks before school starts
- **Address the social disruption of summer explicitly:** plan connection with peers; don't assume friendships will automatically resume
- **Watch for mood shifts at seasonal transitions;** these are often predictable and can be prepared for

Pro Tip

Did you know Seasonal Affective Disorder, also know as SAD is not just a winter phenomenon? This *article* from the Cleveland Clinic provides an overview of Summer SAD - what it is, signs to look for and how to cope.

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Chapter 6: A Framework for Supportive Adults

What Families and Educators Can Do

Whether you are a parent watching your child navigate their first school change, a teacher welcoming a class of new students, or an educator supporting a neurodivergent learner through a major transition, the following framework applies. Think of it in three layers: before, during, and after.

Before: Build the Bridge	• **Celebrate the ending:** honor what is being left behind before rushing to what is next • **Provide information early and in concrete,** accessible formats • **Preview the new environment physically** and/or through stories and visuals • **Open conversations about feelings -** validate both excitement and worry • **Create a shared coping plan;** identify trusted adults in the new context
During: Hold the Space	• **Maintain predictable structures** and consistent communication • **Check in regularly on the emotional experience,** not just the task or academic performance • **Name the neutral zone —** normalize confusion and disorientation • **Facilitate connection;** don't assume it will happen organically • **Watch for signs of prolonged distress** and escalate support when needed
After: Integrate and Reflect	• **Acknowledge the growth:** reflect on what was learned, what changed, and what's now possible • **Invite Shankar's questions: what new capabilities,** values, or identity anchors emerged? • **Share the story of the transition** as a story of resilience, not just survival • **Use the experience to build the student's or family's confidence** in navigating future transitions

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Closing: The Other Side of Change

Maya Shankar ends her TED Talk with a simple but powerful reframe: unexpected change comes for us all, whether we like it or not. When it arrives, the questions become - "How can we stay open and curious about what this change could bring?" and "How might we expand and grow in response to this new experience?"

The research reviewed in this guidebook affirms this framing. Transitions are not simply disruptions to be managed until life returns to normal. They are invitations - sometimes unwelcome, at times painful, always complex - to discover what we're capable of, to clarify what we value, and to find a more stable foundation for our sense of self than the roles and routines that will inevitably shift and change throughout our lifetime.

For the young people in our care, this means that how we support them through today's transitions matters enormously. It's not just about the adjustment they're facing right now—it's about helping them build a strong, healthy foundation for navigating a lifetime of change.

Students who learn that transitions can be survived and can even serve as catalysts for growth gain something beyond traditional academic skills; they build greater confidence, bolstered resilience and an expanded capacity to navigate an uncertain future.

The good news? There is life on the other side of change. The better news? It's often richer and more vibrant than the one we left behind.

"Before you can begin something new, you have to end what used to be."
— William Bridges

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