

A Method to the Madness

Learning new tools can make changes easier to handle.

By **NATASHA SANTOS**

Last year I had to make a typical transition: switch from one school to another because I wasn't doing well. To the people around me it was a practical decision. But for me it symbolized rejection and failure. It reminded me of when my old foster mother made me leave her house when I was 12, and it seemed to prove that I'll feel forever alien to the people around me.



Natasha Santos

asleep or watching television. When I did go to school I mostly did nothing but roam the halls. Occasionally I went to class and was energetic and interested. I vowed to the teachers that I would show up more often. I was determined to change. But I didn't. It wasn't long before the teachers believed I was full of it.

I wasn't. It was just a lot harder to change than I'd thought.

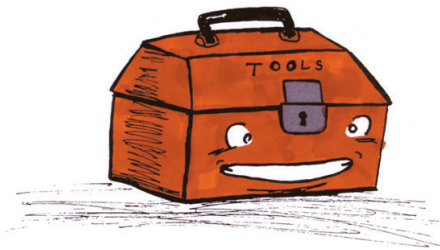
Overwhelming Changes

By the time we're 18 or 21 and ready to leave care, we've dealt with lots of practical changes: we've often

changed schools and homes numerous times. So you would think we'd get good at making transitions, and that when it's time for the big change (aging out) we'd be prepared because we've done it so many times before. But changes also bring up difficult emotions that we haven't acknowledged, and many times we get overwhelmed or depressed.

Luckily there are some ways of handling changes that we can learn so we can more smoothly transition from one phase of our lives to another. These tools, as we called them here at *Represent*, can be helpful and even fun if used faithfully.

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New Ways to Handle Change

The concept that people can use specific tools to get through each stage of a difficult transition was developed to help managers at big corporations assist workers switching from one job to another. But the ideas can be used by anyone, especially us teens in care, who go through so many changes whether we want to or not.

We learned about these tools in a three-month workshop at *Represent* this winter. Using the tools didn't change our past, or the emotions we were going through. They weren't a cure-all. But the tools did help us understand what we were feeling and give us helpful ways to keep moving forward in our lives.

For the workshop, each of us chose a change we wanted to make, but you can use the tools to deal with a change that just happens to you, too, like getting moved from one foster home to another. Each week we talked about how our changes were going, and wrote a diary—which we'll publish in *Represent*—about how we handled our transitions. That way our readers can get ideas about how to handle changes in their own lives.

The Three Stages of Transitions

To get started, we watched a Power Point presentation (ooooooh) on the major stages of transitions:

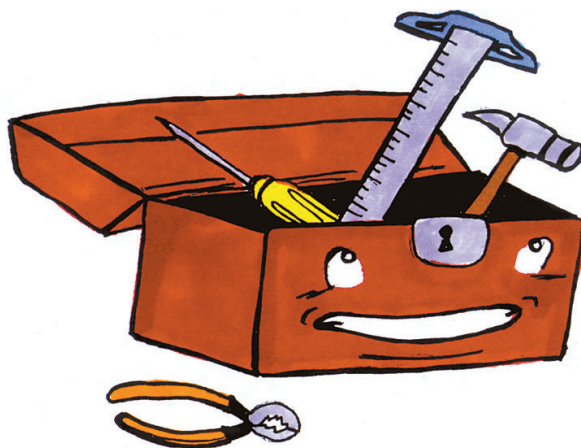
Letting Go: You first must acknowledge that a change is taking place, say goodbye to the old way and recognize what you will be losing and gaining in the transition.

Chaos: Making a change can be uncomfortable. During this time, you've let go of your old way but haven't yet accepted the new way, so feelings of confusion and fear dominate.

New Start: You begin to feel comfortable and have accepted the change.

Getting From One Stage to Another

There are tools you can use in each of the stages to make your transitions smoother. For example, in the Chaos stage you might use daily rituals to give yourself a sense of structure. Or to celebrate the progress you've made in reaching New Start, you could reward yourself with little things like a chocolate shake or even a certificate you make for yourself.



Everyone naturally uses some of these tools. For instance, when *Represent* writer Pauline Gordon moved into a new foster home, she used this tool to manage the chaos: "Rituals and Ceremonies: Surround yourself with things that remind you of good times or make you feel comfortable, peaceful, at home."

Pauline wrote: "Living in a stranger's home has been a difficult transition for me. My room is where I recuperate, gather my thoughts. I've framed pictures or have items lying around that remind me of all the people and things that make me happy. My plant I've grown since I was living at my grandmother's

house reminds me of warm memories shared back home..."

The point of the workshop, though, was to get us to experiment with tools that don't come naturally, and purposefully use a tool every week to really work on our change.

Trying Out New Methods

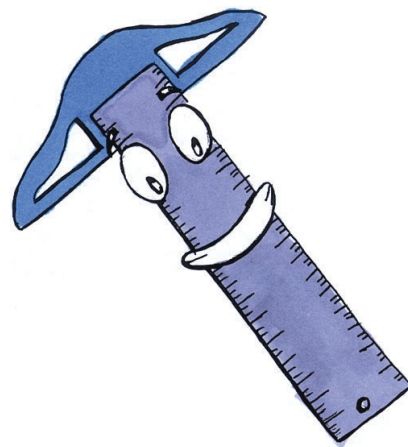
For the first three weeks of the workshop we thought about *past changes* and tried out a few tools. The tools were unique and interesting. Many were ways of coping we'd never used before. Finding out that we could do specific things to make our transitions easier made the changes we'd all soon face aging out seem less scary—fantastic!

Then we picked one change we were struggling with *right now*. We mapped out a 10-week plan of what we wanted to achieve, and the tools we would use each week.

Erica wanted to begin to remember and create good memories because she could only remember bad things from her childhood and often dwelled on those bad feelings in her day. Michael's goal was to figure out which friends he could trust and which he didn't feel comfortable around.

Hattie criticized herself harshly and constantly. She wanted to work on changing the negative script in her head. It took Pauline a while to

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come up with something she wanted to work on, but she finally settled on working toward independence from foster care despite having little support.

I chose to work on my transition from my old school to my new school, and from cutting classes to attending them. I wanted to figure out ways to develop relationships with people in the school and also feel more a part of school in general.

Could We Let Go of Old Ways?

We were all excited, but we were apprehensive, too. Could we change? Were we capable of letting go of the old ways that weren't protecting us anymore? The idea of change seems good, but the actual work and perseverance that goes into a change is scary and uncomfortable. I guess that's why so many people stay stuck in their ways. (I guess that's why they call the middle stage "chaos"!)

We were also uneasy about what transitioning means—letting go of our old defenses, and perhaps reevaluating some things that life and our families had taught us. Like Hattie: Her parents taught her to look on the dark side of life and to believe that life will always be painful and difficult. By changing, Hattie would be saying that the way she had been raised was not OK with her anymore. In a way, she'd be saying

goodbye to a belief in her parents and to ideas that had been stuck in her brain since childhood.

Using Our Tools—and Getting Social Support from the Group

To keep us on track, we met weekly to discuss the tools we used and to give each other feedback on our progress.

Trust in the group didn't come naturally. All of us felt uneasy about exposing so much of ourselves. Michael dealt with this by physically distancing himself. While the group sat in a circle, Michael sat about a foot away. Hattie acted constantly pessimistic at first, putting herself down.

But sometimes we really were able to help each other.

When Pauline wouldn't admit to wanting to make any changes in her life, we asked a barrage of questions and then sat and waited until she was ready to open up to us. She eventually did.

And when Hattie berated herself, we told her not to put herself down. After a while, no more negative words came out of her mouth.

Even though the group reminded us every week of just how difficult and painful it can be to change something about ourselves, watching each other make progress showed us that change is possible. Before the workshop, I don't think any of us really thought that we could make even small changes.

Noticeably Changed

The workshop lasted only 14 weeks, but there were noticeable changes in everyone by the end of the group. Michael began to recognize that his concerns about his friends came from not letting them know what's he's comfort-



able with.

Erica discovered happier childhood memories through conversations with her mother, and took pictures for her scrapbook that reminded her of good times.

Pauline kept herself motivated at handling her job and college plans, and applied for financial support and housing so she could more easily leave care. And Hattie stopped beating herself up.

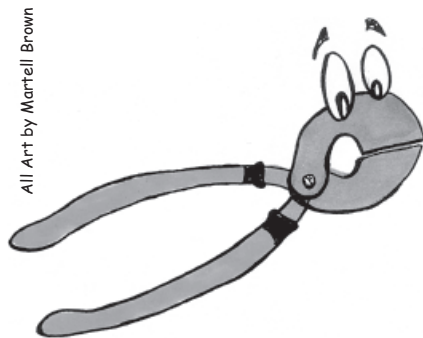
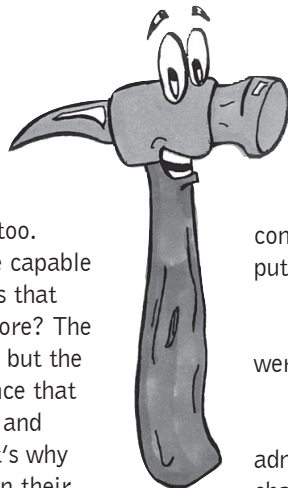
As for me, I was going to class and enjoying in my new school.

By the end, I think we all felt a little more confident that when we need to handle huge changes like aging out, starting college, or beginning a new job, we'll have the ability to make those transitions.

Reader for Independence

Usually when we think about growing up, we think about practical changes like finishing school and finding housing and a job. But the more difficult changes might be the *emotional* transitions we need to make inside: From negatives to positives, from bad relationships to stronger ones, and to independence, communication and remembering the good times.

Emotional independence – the ability to be able to deal with our emotions and our problems – is what will give us the ability to handle those practical changes, and it's the one thing no one can give us. We have to learn on our own, by making mistakes, trying new ways of handling feelings we've had for years. Learning the tools, and using them, is a start. ■



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