

Dealing with Unexpected News Change Uncertainty

When things change unexpectedly, either through planned change (eg organisational change) or **unexpected** good or bad news (eg pregnancy, death, job loss, health problems) it is natural and expected that humans experience emotional reactions in order to prepare for the change. Emotions make us take notice and provide the energy for dealing with important life events.

Unexpected change or news can be perceived by the individual as either positive or negative. This will depend on the nature of the change or news (scope, how long, who is involved, how much we know) and how we feel we can cope with and manage the change or news.

When we feel that unexpected news will lead to **change** we may also feel a sense of **loss** (eg loss of the older ways, self esteem, relationships etc).

If the news or change means that we will have to make significant adjustments, initially this may seem too difficult. We may feel we do not have the skills, patience, time and/or energy to manage, we may experience **stress reactions**.

Unexpected news may not provide us with the full picture initially, and 'people being people' we have a need to understand and know the facts and options so we can move forward. Our minds start thinking about the 'what if's' and 'what shoulds' before we have a full grasp of the news. We also may not know how things will turn out and this causes **uncertainty**, which can be quite stressful.

Common reactions to unexpected news include

- Shock, disbelief, surprise
- Sadness, a sense of loss,
- Worry, Anxiety, apprehension
- Confusion, uncertainty
- Frustration and anger
- Stress

Which could lead to further effects, noticeable at home or at work: eg

- Tiredness, poor sleep,
- Tension, headaches,
- Feeling ill, agitation, restlessness,
- Memory, decision making or concentration difficulties,
- Withdrawing from others,

- Worrying about the future, about what will happen next, or about other work mates,
- Getting out of step with routine work and life (eg not eating or exercising well, forgetting to relax, take time out etc)
- Thinking negatively
- Diminished work focus and productivity
- At work – staff/team members
 - may talk more or talk less
 - may find that morale becomes higher or lower (depending on the situation)
 - may feel more connected or may feel more isolated

In times of unexpected news and change, these are seen as **common reactions to uncommon situations**. Therefore, if you recognise some of these reactions in yourself, this does not mean that you are 'not coping' or 'have problems'. These feelings are valid and it is important to acknowledge and share them. The severity of these reactions will depend on the severity and nature of the news.

While emotional reactions are part of moving forward through important events, if they persist for too long or are too intense, they can exhaust us and may reduce our capacity to fully engage in home and work life.

Most people cope *most* of the time with *most* events. However sometimes we require the support of others to move on and to manage our reactions. Assistance is available through information and face to face or phone counselling through our organisation's EAS (Employee Assistance Service).

Tips for Dealing with unexpected news, change, uncertainty:

- Ask for information and be clear on what you do know.
- Focus on your work, and what you can do, problem solve and plan for situations which are clearly issues for you or will be changing (short or long term). ie work on what is in your control.
- Reduce the tendency to worry too long about the future, or make conclusions or assumptions without the chance to sit down and have a good think or talk.
- Accept that you may be affected by change, uncertainty or unexpected news, and this doesn't mean that you are 'not coping'.
- Seek peer support or family support: Talk with others and share your feelings.
- Support each other; encourage open and mindful discussion with workmates.
- During times of change when frustration, misunderstandings and mis-communications can escalate, it is important to actively manage your communication skills with others.
- Keep to your routine and look after yourself (activity, relaxation, diet, sleep, watch the alcohol, and stimulants like caffeine and cigarettes).
- Please don't hesitate to access support, advice, or counselling through your EAS (free and confidential support for all staff and management).