



Why is change getting harder?

You've seen an astonishing amount of social and technological change during your lifetime. If you're feeling overwhelmed, it's not surprising.

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"One of my earliest memories was sitting on the lap of a man who was born in the 1860s. He wore a large hearing aid in his ear [that was] attached by two twisted wires to a box in his pocket."

—Phillip, born 1959

Top 3 messages about change and getting older:

1. Older Australians have witnessed an astonishing and overwhelming amount of social and technological change.
2. The difficulty in processing change can be influenced by unique cognitive and emotional factors associated with getting older.
3. Seeking support from various sources is crucial when facing difficult changes.

It's been over 60 years since Bob Dylan pointed out that the times were a-changin' – and for those of us who sang along with him, they've changed enormously. Since the middle of the 20th century, the world has experienced the most social and technological change since the Industrial Revolution. And the Baby Boomer generation has lived through it all.

Change can be really unsettling, especially if it's unexpected or doesn't seem to be for the best. Many people like patterns and routines, and change disrupts these. But while it can be frightening, tiring, difficult, annoying and, often, seemingly unnecessary, change can also be exciting, stimulating and interesting.

Why can change be difficult to navigate now? What effects does it have on us? And how can we approach it more positively if we're feeling down about it?



How much life has changed!

We probably all know that everyday life has altered exponentially since the Second World War. But reflecting on the extent of those changes can help us understand why we may be finding it harder to keep up. Have you ever thought about just how much change you've witnessed?

"I have seen science fiction come true, the introduction of colour TV, computers, the Internet, mobile phones, smartphones, smartwatches, artificial intelligence, Mars missions and so much more."

—Phillip

If you were born before the 1960s, almost every area of life has changed for you. Think what's come and gone in:

- **technology** – how you shop, bank, find information, access news, watch TV, listen to music, read, contact someone, tell the time
- **social "standards"** – what you wear, read, watch, eat, drink, do, visit or say in public
- **family structures and roles** – working mums, parenting dads, single parent or split families, no fault divorce, same-sex relationships and marriage equality
- **types of work** – from mostly manufacturing jobs to service-based, from lifelong jobs to the gig economy, from full-time work to part-time and casual
- **finance and economy** – decimal currency, prices, how you pay bills, how you get paid
- **political and social governance** – national borders, ideologies, wars, new minority parties, laws, policies.

Add to that any personal life changes, and it's little wonder your change experience could seem overwhelming. Later life may bring beginnings or endings of relationships, the passing of family and friends, shifts in identity beliefs or fluctuations or new challenges in financial positions. There could be job losses, job gains, retirement, grandchildren, different housing. The development of new medical issues or care needs can be confronting in itself.



Processing change mentally

Lots of older people are actually fascinated by change, but their ability to process it can be influenced by several factors, says clinical psychologist Emily Jallat. Emily's Sydney practice, Silver Minds Psychology, specialises in supporting older adults.

She has observed that change can be overwhelming for older people because we often don't have a cognitive structure to relate the new practice or system to. We often learn something new by connecting the information to something we already know. But when we encounter new technology or ways of social thinking, Emily explains, we "may be missing something to relate it to". So, for example, paying for something with a smartwatch could be hard to comprehend if we've only ever used a watch to tell the time!

Cognitive load may also play a part. As we age, our brain's processing speed and working memory can change. This isn't the same as loss of ability or mental capacity, but it means that it can be harder for us to hold multiple pieces of new information in our minds while we process them. We may also find it hard to retrieve information quickly. Emily likens it to a jam-packed filing cabinet: the more that's in there, the harder it is to find the information you need.

Another factor can be change fatigue, the sense of exhaustion or overwhelm that we sometimes experience when we face ongoing or repeated change. Emily says that as we get older, our emotional and cognitive resources can diminish – which makes new change harder to cope with. If you've ever been through a series of workplace restructures or a sequence of big life changes, you've probably experienced change fatigue.



The experience of change for older people

“Change can be both challenging and enriching,” says Emily. “I often see increased anxiety, grief or loss of confidence when older adults feel change has been imposed on them.”

“On the positive side, some find new meaning, social networks or improved wellbeing after adapting to a change. For example, downsizing can lead to greater connection, or using new technology can keep you in touch with family.” The difference, she says, lies in whether the person feels supported or in control.

Does mindset affect the way you experience change? Yes, says Emily, but it's more than that alone. “Perceptions of change are influenced by past experiences, personality, coping style, health, social support. Change can also highlight issues of identity and independence, which makes responses more complex than simply ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ thinking.”

Our attitude to change can also depend on whether we initiated the change or whether it was forced on us by circumstances outside our control. It's easier to be positive and optimistic about a change you chose to make than one you didn't.



Navigating change as you age

The only thing that's constant, as the saying goes, is change. It's inevitable that things will change, and we often can't control the nature of the changes we encounter. But we can choose how we relate to them and find ways to face them as positively as possible.

Practical tips include:

- actively rethinking change as a chance to grow and learn, rather than something to be dreaded
- focusing on what can be controlled instead of what can't
- remembering other changes we navigated successfully – if we did it then, we can do it now
- fostering curiosity and looking for benefits and opportunities in each new change
- staying socially engaged and informed, so we're less likely to be blindsided by change
- being realistic that change will happen
- using smaller change situations to practise acceptance, ready for bigger ones.

Emily recommends several strategies to her clients, such as noticing and acknowledging any difficult thoughts and feelings rather than struggling with them. She also works with older people to clarify their values and identify what's most important to them, so they can approach change with more openness and flexibility. And self-compassion – being kind to yourself if you're not coping easily or positively – is important.

If it's getting a bit tough, it's a good idea to turn to others for support, whether practical, professional or personal.

- **Psychologists** with a special interest in older people or ageing, like Emily, can help you with tailored coping strategies, mental health support or grief counselling. Your GP can refer you.
- **Supportive family and friends** who are patient and willing to help you navigate practical changes – for example, teaching you new digital technology – can be invaluable and empowering.
- **Occupational therapists** can help you manage practical changes by finding you new ways to approach tasks. Find out more about occupational therapy in our feature article.
- **Community or faith groups** can provide connection, peer experiences and emotional or practical support. Some local councils host or promote social groups for older people, so check their websites.

"The 1960s and 1970s were times of rapid change, and older generations often complained about the pace of change, and the hair length of the young men."

—Phillip

Well, maybe some things never really change after all!



Emily Jallat

Emily Jallat is a clinical psychologist passionate about supporting older adults to live their best lives. Her practice, Silver Minds Psychology in Sydney's northern suburbs, is focused on older adults and their unique situations.