



Transition to Civilian Life

Information Sheet 2 'The emotional pathway'



Introduction

Regardless of length of service, everyone leaves the Army at some point. This can be a challenging time and involve a period of adjustment which can trigger a number of emotions from exhilaration to pain and anxiety. It may not just be the Service leaver who is affected; it may also impact upon family and friends. There is high quality practical support available to Service leavers undergoing their transition but there is little information or advice about what Service leavers and their families might experience emotionally. This Transition Information Sheet seeks to highlight some of the emotions that Service leavers and their families might experience and reassure them that this is quite natural and that in all but a very few cases life returns to 'normality' fairly quickly.

Emotions

Some Service leavers will leave the Army quite happily and their transition to civilian life will be completed without any great upset. Others who may have served a short engagement, a full career or been compulsory discharged may feel that their transition to civilian life is unwelcome which can make the necessary personal and family adjustment more difficult to achieve. Transition brings uncertainty and anxiety with many different emotions. Understanding this in advance of your Transition to civilian life may assist you and your family to cope with your transition journey. Some of these possible emotions are shown in table 1.

| | |
|---|--|
| Feeling of loss (bereavement) for their military career | Not understood or appreciated by "civvies" |
| Not knowing yourself anymore | Loss of camaraderie |
| Fear of the unknown or the future | Feeling that "civvy" work is unfulfilling |
| Not feeling competent | Annoyance with "trivial" family matters |
| Lack of control | Financial worries |
| General anxiety and worry | Fatigue / Insomnia |
| Wanting to be alone | Feeling of not being valued |
| Loss of identity and status | Feeling of inadequacy |
| Loss of purpose | Temptation towards alcohol abuse |

Change

Everyone experiences change throughout their life and have developed their own coping mechanisms. Coping strategies used in service may be helpful in transforming to civilian life. Knowing what might be experienced emotionally in advance and taking things a step at a time may make these challenges easier to overcome.

Stages of Change

Most people pass through a similar progression of stages when confronted with change. Having knowledge of these stages may help people cope and provide reassurance when they feel 'stuck'. Many accounts of change have 3 core stages as are shown in diagram 1.

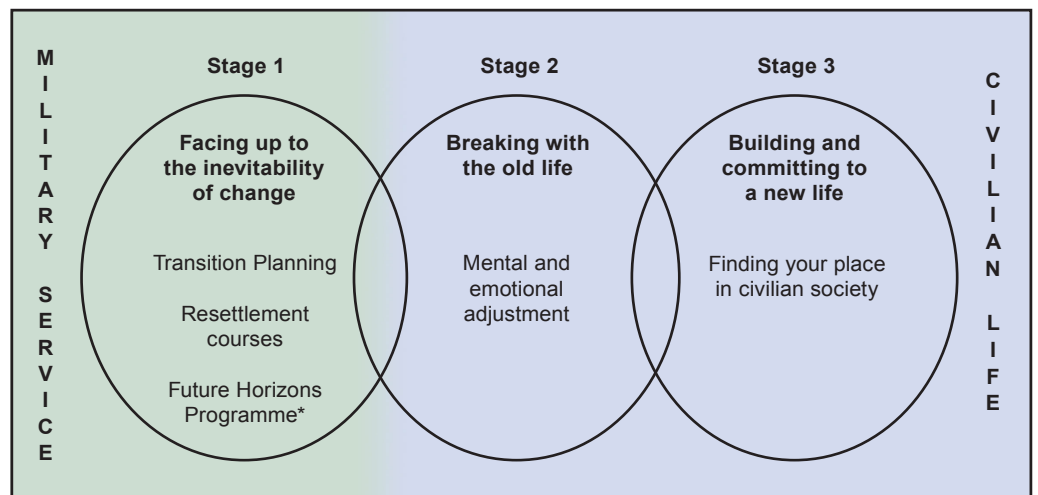


Diagram 1: "3 Stages of Change" showing the requirements for a smooth emotional transition from the military to civilian life.

*www.ctp.org.uk/futurehorizons

First Stage:

Develop your knowledge of how civilian society functions.

Be prepared to walk away from the emotional attachment and commitment to a military career.

Civilian life and work may offer different feelings of satisfaction. Stay positive.

Mutual support within the family unit.

Talk about the forthcoming changes.

Understand the processes and the support you are entitled to.

Mark your departure with an event which allows you to move on.

“Facing up to the inevitability of change”

Continuing interaction with civilian society whilst in service will make the process of adjustment to civilian life easier. Ultimately it is up to the Service leaver and their family to manage their journey which may be made easier by embracing Transition preparation early and throughout their military careers.

Feeling of Loss and Fulfilment

A Service leaver, and to some extent their family, might feel they are losing their vocation, identity and status when leaving the Service to which they have been physically and emotionally committed. It may be perceived that civilian work lacks the same sense of purpose and fulfilment that a Service career provided. There may also be a feeling of isolation within new civilian surroundings and a lack of a common bond that existed on the ‘patch’ or in the block. Retaining links with civilian society and embracing transition preparation early may reduce this feeling of loss and assist the process of adjustment resulting in a new motivation and a sense of gratification.

Family Support

The Service leaver may not be the only person affected by this change. The instinctive reaction of the close family is often to want to protect and look after the emotional needs of the Service leaver who may be so swept up with their own emotions and actions to recognise their family’s needs. It is important that Service leavers or their family do not shoulder the burden of change in isolation and that the whole family is involved in both facing the future together and providing mutual support.

Communication

Communicating with family and friends is key in facing up to the future. Often Service leavers can avoid thinking about change by burying themselves in military work and duties until the last possible moment. Creating time to talk is vital so that everyone in the family can prepare themselves for the challenges and changes ahead. Talking openly and honestly about the inevitability of change with all family members, especially children, may prevent unnecessary worry about the future and reduce the emotional strain for all.

The Transition Journey

Service leavers are provided with Resettlement support based on entitlement as they transition to civilian life. These opportunities, and supporting processes need to be fully understood in order to maximise their benefits and discussed openly with the family and friends.

Discharge

It can often be helpful to begin the process of change by ensuring that the Service leaver has a chance to say goodbye or acknowledge the completion of their military service. A goodbye lunch or attendance at a last mess function provides a symbolic event to make a clean break and provide impetus to move on. This does not mean all ties should be suddenly broken. For most people change takes time. Keeping in contact with old friends and colleagues and popping back to “see how things are” can be an important way of coping with sudden change for both Service leaver and family member. However, an over-dependence on the military community can slow down the process of adjustment.

Second Stage:

Adjusting back to civilian life can take some time – be patient and understanding.

“Breaking with the old life”

Adjustment

There will be a period of the whole family adjusting to new routines and new ways of doing things. The Service leaver may be at home a lot more than previously experienced. While this may be welcome, it could also present a challenge to the family routine which might cause frustration. A way of dealing with this period of adjustment is honest discussion and compromise.

A feeling of insecurity is perfectly natural. Gain confidence by having a plan to achieve your goal.

The earlier you prepare for and accept your transition to civilian life, the smoother it may be.

In civilian business it can be all about you and what you deliver. Sell yourself and look out for yourself.

Family routine is good. Awareness and understanding is important.

Insecurity

Until a Service leaver feels established in civilian society, their life may appear uncertain and unpredictable when compared to the stability and security of life in the Services. This insecurity is perfectly normal. Again, talking routinely and regularly about the transition journey with all members of the family, friends and others who have experienced the 'journey' will share the burden and assist Service leavers and family members to work towards a common goal.

Progress

A sound Transition plan, reviewed and adjusted throughout your career and developed in detail around Resettlement should smooth your transition progress. This should allow the efficient use of time and resources and hopefully reduce stress and anxiety levels and provide confidence, clarity of thought, purpose and a positive frame of mind which may assist in the process of securing work. There is no set time to complete this stage. However, it is believed that the sooner a Service leaver considers 'breaking from the old lifestyle' the easier and smoother this adjustment might be.

Competition at Work

There may be a difference between career progression in the military and civilian employment which should be understood if the Service leaver is not to be disadvantaged. Career management in the military is undertaken by the chain of command with courses, postings and promotion largely based on annual evaluations with limited involvement from Service personnel. Competing with their peer group by excelling in their job and demonstrating potential is reflected in Mid Year Appraisals and annual evaluations. From a Service person's perspective competition is not obvious and is largely goal-orientated based on personal pride rather than seeking personal advantage over colleagues. Trust and confidence in colleagues, mutual support and an over-riding commitment to the task is the military way.

The civilian work place may be different in that job security may be dependent on meeting or exceeding individual targets and advancement is something that is achieved by the individual competing with colleagues on a daily basis. This culture of 'survival of the fittest' in a more ruthless environment is fundamentally different to the Services. This can cause surprise and alarm to Service leavers entering the civilian workforce.

Selling yourself at work and in interview is routine in a successful civilian career and understanding this in advance may emotionally prepare Service leavers to make the necessary adjustment.

Family Adjustment

Family members, who are embracing their transition to civilian life, might feel let down if the Service leaver is reluctant to make the necessary mental break from the Services. Family relationships are vital during times of tension and children especially appreciate stability and routine in their lives so maintaining domestic routines and family rituals can help in reducing stress levels. As with most things in life, the greater the preparation, awareness and understanding of known events, the easier they are to overcome. Full and early commitment to Transition throughout a Service career will ease the pathway to civilian life and reduce anxiety and emotional turmoil.

Third Stage:

Be flexible, review plans regularly and be realistic.

"Building & committing to a new life"

Flexible and Realistic

It often takes time to realize that change has been achieved and the period of uncertainty has all but passed. In Stage 3 the family and the Service leaver may have a clearer idea of where life is going. There may be some stability to life and the family seems more settled. Some agreed plans and ambitions may be achieved or progressing well, although progress may not always meet your planned timelines and may even include the odd backwards step. This too is common and should not be a reason for undue concern.

Use your personal and military qualities in the civilian workplace wisely.

The relationship with civilian work colleagues may not be as close and supportive as you have been used to.

The Person in the Military versus The Military in the Person!

Service leavers join civilian life with unique and valuable experience, transferable skills, discipline and personal qualities which distinguish them from the civilian workforce. There is a marked difference between bringing positive military qualities into the civilian workplace and a Service leaver behaving like a soldier in a civilian work place. Some employers, industries and sectors place great value on the military demeanor whilst others may use this 'difference' to reinforce preconceived ideas about the military and view it as a potential problem or reason why a Service leaver might not fit in. Being aware of this is important so that Service leavers can present themselves in the most beneficial way.

The workplace

Service leavers have left an institution with a unique culture and ethos, values and standards, a common bond and a commitment to the cause and to colleagues which is absolute. The civilian workplace can be different where few of the characteristics of military service might be present. Two points stand out which may cause Service leavers frustration and disappointment; first the camaraderie with work colleagues is likely to be different with a greater focus on individual achievement and personal satisfaction. The second, which is linked to the first, is that the level of mutual support may not be so apparent and the assumption that your colleagues 'have got your back covered' may be misplaced. This may require some time to understand and adjust to. It may also be the case that employers and colleagues may not fully appreciate the range of skills and experience that Service leavers have.

A simple list of Do's and Don'ts are shown in Table 2 below.

| Do not... | Do.... |
|--|--|
| Avoid planning change | Take time to reflect and think on the change and talk as a family about the changes ahead |
| Put things off till tomorrow | Accept that building a future is hard work so plan early & keep planning as you go |
| Stop talking – especially to family or friends | Remain flexible and open to change. You won't be able to control everything |
| Hide or disguise your thoughts or feelings from yourself or your family | Continue to believe in yourself and your abilities & try and think of change as an opportunity for you and your family |
| Drink too much - especially with those that are still serving | Take advantage of all the opportunities that your military resettlement package offers you & your family |
| Underestimate the change that you will have to go through. Transition to civilian life tests most people | Actively look after the health and well-being of you and your family |
| Think that the family will cope with change with no difficulty | Accept that new ways of thinking and behaving are required as well as new skills |
| Assume that everything will go to plan | Be open and listen and learn from those in your new civilian environment |
| Underestimate how different 'civvy' work and life can be and how competitive things are outside the wire | Recognize when you are "stuck" & don't be afraid to seek help |
| Expect to be settled in your new life quickly | Reflect and consider how you successfully have coped with stress before |
| Reject taking advice or learning from "civvies" | Reflect on your own experiences as a soldier and family. Recall what coping strategies you have used in the past |
| Judge people by military standards | Do not leave it too long to get assistance or advice if you feel you need support |
| Over-commit financially prior to discharge | Make financial provision so you have access to funds around your discharge date |

Welfare Support

Welfare support for those in Service is provided by your unit and the Army Welfare Service if necessary. The MOD's organisation that supports veterans and their families is Veterans UK. Information on Veterans UK can be found at www.veterans-uk.info or via their 24/7 helpline in 0808 1914218.