



# Coping with Change

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As I write this article, the lives of so many people around the world are filled with fear and uncertainty. L.P. Lovecraft, an early 19th Century American author once said, “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is the fear of the unknown.” We are creatures of habit who strive for clarity, consistency, and certainty in our lives. When change occurs, we are often ill-equipped to effectively manage it. So, how do you handle change? Do you brush it aside or hit it head-on? Does change drain you? Or does it get your juices flowing?

## Who Moved My Cheese?

For many, change can be difficult as it challenges routines, rituals, relationships, sense of security, identity, and thought processes. Managing change spans the spectrum from denial to full acceptance. Because change is inevitable, it is worth learning how best to deal with it. Let’s use the book *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spenser Johnson to better understand the importance of embracing change.

*Who Moved My Cheese?* is a short, entertaining parable about the dangers of complacency and the importance of embracing change. This cautionary tale takes place in a dark, elaborate maze where four characters look for “cheese” -- a metaphor for the outcomes that we want in life. The “maze” is where we get meaning – relationships, financial security, a good job, a supportive community, a cause, and more. The characters in *Who Moved My Cheese?* are Sniff, Scurry, Hem, and Haw. Sniff and Scurry are mice who use a trial-and-error method to find cheese. The two Littlepeople, Hem and Haw, use advanced analytics and sophisticated strategies in search of their cheese. The parable explores the ways in which one responds to uncertainty and change.

Let's analyze the actions and beliefs of Sniff, Scurry, Hem, and Haw when they arrive at Cheese Station C one morning to find that their cheese is gone.

- Sniff and Scurry are not surprised because they had recognized that the supply of cheese was getting smaller every day. Immediately, they lace up their running shoes and move at full speed through the maze in search of new cheese. The two mice do not overanalyze the situation. They simply use their natural instincts and go. The circumstances at Cheese Station C have changed. Action was necessary.
- Later that day, Hem and Haw arrive at Cheese Station C. As they had not been paying attention to the changes that had been taking place, they are unprepared and astounded by what they find. Someone moved their cheese. The Littlepeople are shocked, dismayed, and in disbelief. Rather than moving on, they rant and rave about the injustice of it all. And they blame each other.
- Hem and Haw are in denial. They go to bed that night with the expectation that their cheese will be in Cheese Station C the next morning. It is not. Shocked and perplexed, Hem and Haw use their brains to come up with plausible reasons for what has occurred. They know that they are smarter than the mice. Their massive intellect will find a solution.
- As Hem and Haw are paralyzed with a sense of entitlement, Sniff and Scurry go deep into the maze – up and down corridors – looking for new cheese stations. They move on with their lives. And they find new cheese.
- With fear and trepidation, Hem decides that he must also enter the maze in search of cheese. Although initially uncomfortable, his confidence grows over time. Hem learns a lot about himself including the importance of keeping an open mind to change. Hem writes the following on the wall of the maze:
  - If you do not change, you can become extinct.
  - Smell the cheese often so that you know when it is getting old.
  - Movement in a new direction helps you find new cheese.
  - Old beliefs do not lead you to new cheese

While there are many takeaways from *Who Moved My Cheese?*, I would like to focus upon three:

### **Lesson 1 – Change is Inevitable**

Do you spend time and energy trying to avoid change? If so, you are not alone. There are two types of coping – escape and active. Escape coping involves changing behaviors to avoid thinking or feeling things that cause discomfort. Active coping, on the other hand, empowers you to tackle a problem head-on. When it comes to navigating change, active coping is healthier as the stress is being addressed, rather than avoided.

In his blog, “10 Tips for Dealing with Change Positively in Your Workplace,” Ban Weston, Managing Director of wm consulting, suggests the following:

1. Acknowledge the change. Accepting that change is happening is step number one.
2. Face your fears. Consider writing down your fears and building plans to combat them. Knowing that you have strategies to combat will defuse your anxiety.
3. Confront your feelings and seek support. Let the people who know you best guide your actions and thoughts in a positive direction.
4. Stop the fearful thoughts and replace them with something positive. When negativity creeps into your mind, immediately turn to something positive.
5. Be flexible and embrace change. Make every attempt to be open and flexible. Even if you do not think the change is in your best interest, keep an open mind.
6. Be part of the change. View change as an opportunity. Adopt an attitude of anticipation and excitement. Your attitude is key to moving forward.
7. Communication and more communication. Often, the fear of change surrounds the unknown. Ask questions. Actively listen. Gain clarity and direction.
8. Reduce stress and anxiety. When confronted with change, it is imperative that you are healthy and active. Make a special effort to focus on exercise and nutrition.
9. Have a sense of meaning. Acknowledge your positive qualities, skill, and attributes. Focus on past successes.
10. Continue to do your work and see the big picture. Realign your vision and goals to support your new direction.
11. Change is inevitable...let go of the past and face your fears.
12. Entitlement gets you nowhere.
13. Use change as a catalyst to explore, learn, and grow. Embrace new pathways.

## Lesson 2 – Watch Out for Entitlement

Simply defined, the word entitlement is the right to something. It is the belief that one is inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment. A barrier to change is entitlement. Why? Because there is a mindset of “you owe me.” Entitled people are self-absorbed to the point where they cannot see the forest through the trees. It is their belief that they should be given special treatment. It is their opinion that the rules do not apply to them.

As we saw in *Who Moved My Cheese?*, Hem and Haw were entitled. When they arrived at Cheese Station C, they were unprepared for what they found. “What no cheese?” Hem yelled. He continues yelling, “No Cheese? No Cheese?” as though if he shouted loud enough someone would put it back. “Who moved my cheese?” he hollered. Finally, he put his hands on his hips, his face turned red, and he screamed at the top of his voice, “It’s not fair!” Although Hem had many positive attributes, his sense of entitlement was so strong that it prevented him from moving ahead. His fear of the unknown crushed his soul. In *Who Moved My Cheese?*, we learn that the biggest inhibitor to change lies within yourself, and nothing gets better until you change.

In the March 2019 issue of *Rough Notes Magazine*, I authored an article entitled “Resilience...Your Greatest Ally in Your Quest for Success.” Resilience is that wonderful skill that

enables you to recover quickly from challenges. In the article, I highlighted the importance of embracing failure, continual self-improvement, and looking toward the future.

### **Lesson 3 – Use Change as a Catalyst to Explore, Learn, and Grow**

Coping with change is not easy. Yet, the process is empowering and refreshing. When you step back and realize that change is inevitable and embrace new perspectives, relationships, and situations, your mind, body, and spirit will grow.

While you may be initially disoriented by the prospect of change, expect to experience pendulum-like swings of emotions from pessimism to optimism. This is positive as it gives evidence that your mind is beginning to recognize the healthy attributes of change. Do not attempt to suppress your emotions. Let them surface and manage them one by one. The process is therapeutic and empowering. In due time, your mind will shift from what you have lost to what might be gained. Do not rush the process. Be patient. If the acceptance of change takes longer than you wish, don't fret. Remember, coming to grips with change is a gradual process. The final stage is your acceptance of change.

Acceptance does not mean that you have entirely moved on from your prior situation, but it does signify that it is time to put the past behind you and explore, learn, and grow.

Coping with change...you are now ready!

#### About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America." Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.