

DR. NANCY SCHLOSSBERG



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We've all experienced personal and professional transitions. But why should a transition that is positive, desired, and exciting be so difficult? Dr. Nancy Schlossberg was in the throes of a geographical transition when she asked herself this same question.

She had just been appointed to an executive position at a prestigious non-profit organization in Washington; her best friend from college lived there; and her husband was more than agreeable to the move from Detroit. But she says, "I had a terrible time with the move. I couldn't understand what was troubling me. The move certainly wasn't a piece of cake."

This experience—along with some previous research that began at Wayne State University—led to many years researching and writing on the factors that contribute to transitions that are either trouble-free or difficult.

After leaving the non-profit, she became a professor at the University of Maryland and over the years conducted the first study on geographical moving, the effect of layoffs on NASA employees, adult learners who returned to college, and how clerical staff balances work and family. Through the study and writing process, a model or framework of dealing with transitions took shape. Her popular book *Overwhelmed: Coping with Life's Ups and Downs* discusses how to use one's strengths in responding to transitions. The book now has a second edition published in late 2007.

"We celebrate events; we celebrate happy transitions such as marriages, promotions, a new baby. But non-events—an anticipated promotion, engagement, marriage, baby, or education that don't happen—can change a person's world as much as a joyful event. We need to bring non-events out of the closet and recast and reframe their acceptance. At the University of Maryland, students and I conducted several studies of non-events. I wrote *Going to Plan B: How You Can Cope, Regroup, and Start Your Life on a New Path* that discussed coping with non-events."

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She lists the key elements of a psychological portfolio: identity, relationships, and purpose. "When people retire, they miss the sense of identity that work gave to them and to others. They miss the tag that gave them an identity. Retirees must also look for substitutes for relationships they previously had. They miss the everyday interaction with colleagues at work, they miss the office, the space. They first need to start thinking about what will substitute for work. Another part relating to relationships involves the changing dynamics and power shift if the retiree is

married. If single, the person has to think about what to do at home to make up for the gap left by leaving the workplace. The third element involves purpose. A retiree once told me that he needed a mission statement and a CEO of a Fortune 500 company said he felt hollow. Retirees need to define their new purpose in life. When you retire from one situation, you then have to develop a new purpose, identity, and new relationships."

Nancy discusses another topic that is of considerable interest to her—mattering. "During a transition such as retirement, people frequently feel that they no longer matter. They don't feel that they're appreciated, noticed, and depended upon. Having a reason to get up in the morning—mattering—is part of a strong psychological portfolio. Volunteering and becoming a life-long learner helps one to feel that he or she matters."

Nancy advises women to have an identity that is not tied to a husband or a role, such as mother. "Be proud of your husband and children, but have a sense of yourself," she says. "Women have to deal with discontinuity; they will probably be widowed, divorced, or single. There are transitions that you cannot make not happen. Women have to cope effectively with them. Life is not linear so women must be prepared to take care of themselves when discontinuity occurs."

Nancy's engaging personality, practical guidance, and passion for her life work have made her a frequent guest on radio and television programs. She and her previous book on retirement *Retire Smart, Retire Happy* are featured in the 90-minute PBS pledge special of the same title. In addition, she has been featured on the front page of *USA Today* and quoted in many newspapers including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and Cleveland's *The Plain Dealer*.

While she still actively pursues topic to investigate from a different angle or perspective, she also attends outdoor water aerobic classes three times a week, serves on the board of SCOPE, attends meetings and fundraisers, and goes to the beach in late afternoon. And yes, she does miss her office and her colleagues since she retired.

Her greatest supporter is her husband Steve who she describes as a feminist. He was a labor organizer in the south, general counsel of the United Auto Workers, and undersecretary of labor in the Reagan administration. Her daughter Karen is a farmer in Maryland raising goats, endangered chickens, and llamas—and two young grandchildren.

Her son Mark is married and owns a Huntington Learning Center in Maryland. Nancy leaves Sarasota to spend the summer months in the Washington area.

"I tried to translate my academic studies on transitions into language and publications that help people in their everyday lives. I hope people and my former students remember me as someone who helped other people, who opened doors, who encouraged people to follow their desires, and most of all that I helped make things happen." ❧

Story: Carol Darling
Photos: Barbara Banks