



BACKGROUNDER: MOVING AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Moving is frequently cited as one of the most stressful life events, after the death of a loved one, divorce or illness. According to a report from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (Facts for Families: Children and Family Moves, 1999), moving to a new community is “one of the most stress-producing events a family faces.” While the reasons for moving can be positive - such as the purchase of a house or a job promotion - settling into a new home, connecting to a new environment and recreating a home are almost always chaotic and stressful.

Disruption of the Routine

According to Galen Tinder, senior consultant with relocation agency Ricklin-Echikson Associates, Inc., “selling a house, securing housing in the new location, packing and transporting family goods and the endless tasks of ‘settling in,’” are all hard work, but perhaps the most stressful part of moving is the acceptance of permanent change.

“Nearly every aspect of common family life changes: daily routines, schools, community associations, friendships, even the physical landscape,” says Tinder. This disruption in everyday life can manifest itself in a range of reactions. “Shock, anger, anxiety, sadness, fear, confusion and disorientation” are a few of the common emotions felt by new movers, says William Bridges, Ph.D., an acclaimed expert on transitional management and author of several books on the topic.

Add to these feelings the chaos of unpacking boxes, forging new relationships and searching for new doctors, dentists, hair stylists, dry cleaners, trustworthy auto mechanics – even good restaurants – and it is understandable why moving is traumatic.

The Loss of Identity

In her book, *Making the Big Move: How to Transform Relocation into a Creative Life Transition* (New Harbinger Publications, 1999), Cathy Goodwin, Ph.D., explains how moving is a significant life transition that forces people to reconsider their identities. “Most people recognize that marriage, divorce, graduation and childbirth are significant life transitions ... marked by ceremonies and rituals, such as weddings, funerals and graduations. Moving can be an equally significant life transition, but there are no ceremonies to mark its passage.” As a result, new movers invariably feel a sense of loss.

According to *Smart Moves: Your Guide through the Emotional Maze of Relocation* (Audrey McCollum, M.S.W. et al, Smith & Kraus, 1996), loss of identity is a common reaction to relocation. Moving is often associated with a new job, marriage or having children, forcing movers to relinquish their old, familiar roles. In addition, social identity is dependent on relationships in the neighborhood and community, leaving newcomers to feel like outsiders.

The Disproportionate Effects on Children and Women

The authors of *Smart Moves* observe that children's reactions to relocation vary depending on their age group. For infants and preschool-aged children, stress comes from a loss of familiarity and therefore they may be easily frightened by strange surroundings. Elementary school-age children often become attached to people and places and may experience an intense sense of loss and disconnection after a move.

Adolescents, however, have the most difficulty adjusting to relocation due to the loss of identity and friendships that may have taken years to develop. "A major move strips away consistency, reliability and familiarity," the book explains. "Relocated teenagers must deal with massive external change on top of inner turbulence."

In *The Trauma of Moving: Psychological Issues for Women* (Audrey McCollum, MSW, Sage Publications, 1990), the author reports on a two-year study involving a representative sample of women who dealt with the various issues of moving, and specifically focuses on the role of women as families' primary caretakers and managers, and thus, the "chief architects" of the moving process.

A more recent study by Lynn Magdol, published in *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* (2002) examined the effects of residential mobility on the psychological well being of men and women. Magdol found that, on average, women had higher depression scores than men did following a move. Women typically have more responsibility for child care than men do, and children are more likely to need extra attention during relocation.

In addition, women are more likely to have more responsibilities before the move, as well as during the transition period, "by requiring them to do extra cleaning, arrange for the transport of household possessions, acquire new household items, and perform other non-routine domestic chores. This extra burden may contribute to subsequent psychological distress in the months and years following a mobility event."

Culture Shock and Wariness

Even after the boxes are unpacked and the house is beginning to look like home, life remains stressful for new movers. Whether moving to a neighboring state or across the country, culture shock is traumatizing for newcomers. "Culture shock presents one of the most unique and complex transitions we can face in our lives," explains internationally known acculturation specialist and life coach Nancy Morris. Culture shock, like other aspects of moving, is "associated with stress, anxiety, confusion and feelings of being lost."

According to the authors of *Smart Moves*, "In our violence-ridden society, many people have become wary of approaches by strangers." Conversely, they add, "In our mobile society, many people are wary of forming attachments to newcomers who may soon move away again. Others are absorbed in their own lives and don't have the time or energy to open the door to someone new."

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