

Life in the in-between

There are periods in life where we no longer feel rooted in who we once were, but have not yet arrived at who we are becoming. In these moments, life can begin to feel suspended - no longer anchored to what was familiar, but not yet settled into what comes next.

Sometimes, these periods are only recognisable in hindsight. At the time, they may simply feel like uncertainty, disorientation, or a quiet sense that something no longer fits in the way it once did.

Identity, routine, direction, and certainty can begin to loosen. We may find ourselves emotionally untethered - no longer fully connected to a previous version of life, while still unable to see clearly what comes next.

These in-between spaces can feel deeply uncomfortable. We are often encouraged to move quickly through transition, to regain stability, clarity, or certainty as soon as possible. Yet many periods of change do not unfold neatly. They ask us to live, for a time, within the unknown.

These experiences can emerge in many forms - through illness, grief, relationship breakdown, major life change, or periods where the future feels uncertain and the familiar begins to loosen. While these transitions may look different on the surface, they often carry a similar emotional texture: a sense of being between identities, ways of living, or versions of ourselves. In this way, the experience of living in the in-between may be one of the more universal, yet often unspoken, parts of being human.

In a mental health context

Within mental health care, this sense of living in the in-between can become especially visible during the transition from inpatient care back into the community. The move from hospital to home is often spoken about as a positive step forward. Yet for many people, this transition is far more complex than simply leaving one place and returning to another. It can involve moving from survival into rebuilding; from the structure and containment of the ward into a life that suddenly feels far less certain.

People may no longer identify with the version of themselves that entered hospital, while still feeling unsure of who they are becoming beyond it. Transition is rarely a neat bridge from A to B. More often, it is a suspended space - a threshold where identity, safety, meaning, and direction can all begin to feel unsettled.

It is here, within this space between old identities and emerging ones, that many people find themselves living in what I have come to think of as 'life in the in-between'.

What falls away

What often falls away in life in the in-between is a sense of certainty. The structures, routines, identities, and ways of being that once helped us feel anchored can begin to loosen, sometimes gradually, sometimes all at once.

As familiar reference points begin to shift, people may find themselves questioning not only where they are heading, but who they are within the process of getting there.

Within inpatient mental health settings, many of these anchoring structures are built into everyday life. Routine, containment, familiarity, support, and predictability can all become part of the rhythm of the ward environment. The transition back into the community can therefore involve more than simply leaving hospital. It can also involve the sudden removal of structures that had, for a time, helped people feel held, oriented, or emotionally contained.

Returning to community life can involve moving from identifying as someone who is unwell towards someone hoping to rebuild a life beyond illness. From survival into rebuilding. From being held within the structures of the ward into reconnecting with meaning, purpose, autonomy, and everyday life again.

Yet these shifts rarely happen all at once. Identity often changes more slowly than circumstance, leaving many people suspended between old ways of being and emerging ones.

The Human Need for Orientation

Human beings naturally seek orientation. Not necessarily certainty in the sense of having all the answers, but a sense of groundedness within our lives - knowing who we are, where we belong, what holds us, and how to move through the world around us.

When these things begin to dissolve, people can start to feel psychologically adrift. Identity, direction, routine, meaning, and familiarity may no longer feel as stable as they once did, leaving us without the internal and external reference points that once helped us feel anchored.

Perhaps this is why periods of transition can feel so deeply destabilising. Not simply because life feels uncertain, but because uncertainty can leave people untethered from the structures and rhythms that once gave shape to everyday life.

It may also help explain why, during times of transition, people often long so deeply for structure, rhythm, companionship, containment, and trust. Not necessarily to remove uncertainty altogether, but to feel supported enough to exist within it.

Leaving Little Room for the In-Between

Modern life often leaves very little room for the in-between.

Periods of uncertainty, transition, or emotional disorientation are frequently treated as temporary states to move through as quickly as possible. We are encouraged to regain stability, clarity, productivity, or a sense of “normality” - often before we have fully had time to process what has changed.

Within mental health contexts, this can sometimes appear through pressure to recover, reintegrate, or return to everyday life, while the deeper psychological work of rebuilding identity, meaning, and orientation is still unfolding beneath the surface.

Yet transitions rarely happen as neatly or as quickly as the world around us often expects them to.

Historically, many cultures recognised periods of transition as significant spaces in their own right - times of uncertainty, reflection, transformation, and becoming. In contrast, modern life can sometimes leave little space for the slower, less visible process of living through change.

Held Within Transition

Perhaps uncertainty itself is not always the enemy.

Much of modern life encourages us to move quickly towards resolution, as though periods of transition are simply temporary interruptions before “real life” can begin again. Yet uncertainty is also an unavoidable part of being human.

Perhaps discomfort increases not only because uncertainty exists, but because people are left alone within it - without enough support, continuity, companionship, or containment to help them feel held while moving through change.

Through my conversations with people navigating the transition from inpatient care back into the community, a common theme has not necessarily been the desire for certainty, but the desire for accompaniment. Trusted relationships, continuity, understanding, structure, and the reassurance of not having to navigate uncertainty entirely alone.

What helps people feel held during periods of transition may not always be certainty or resolution, but the presence of things that restore a sense of orientation.

Companionship, rhythm, continuity, meaning, trust, and spaces where people feel able to exist without needing to have everything figured out.

In this way, support may not always be about removing uncertainty altogether, but about helping people feel accompanied within it.

Perhaps this invites us to think differently about transition itself. Not simply as a temporary inconvenience before life can begin again, but as a meaningful state of existence in its own right - one that can hold growth, reflection, rebuilding, and becoming.

There is life within the in-between. And perhaps, over time, learning to exist within uncertainty can become something different from simply waiting for it to end.

By Tamara Batchelor, May 2026

Part two of this reflection is titled '*Nature as a healing space*'

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