The Psychology of Career Changes

Today’s job market is proving the old adage about change being the only constant in life. As U.S. Department of Labor statistics reveal, the average person born in the later years of the baby boom will hold more than 10 jobs in his or her lifetime.

For many, this current period of deep recession, job uncertainty and employment woes has led to a difficult time of career-changing decisions — sometimes by necessity, other times by choice. Research suggests that baby boomers also may be the demographic most affected by tough economic times, probably bearing the largest share of job losses.

Danielle Grey, director of Career Services at South University — West Palm Beach, says the emotional strain of finding a job can be a lot for a new graduate or anyone starting over in the job market. This year, Grey says she’s received a number of calls from alumni who were working in their field and have since been laid off.

“It is exhausting and it requires so much effort on the job seeker's side,” Grey says. “I advise students and graduates to literally send out around 15 resumes a day, which is tiring since each one needs to be individualized.”

Jim Hann, an administrator for Allegheny East CareerLink in Pittsburgh, Pa., also acknowledges the mental hang-ups that job seekers can face, especially middle-aged ones.

“People are very resistant to change in general,” he says. “Their biggest challenge is getting over the frustration.”

Findings from a recent National Alliance on Mental Illness survey clearly indicate a link between the economy and depressive symptoms. Individuals who are unemployed were found to be four times as likely as those with jobs to report symptoms consistent with severe mental illness.

While not much more vulnerable to job loss than any other age group, baby boomers may have the hardest time adjusting to unemployment or trying to find a job at their age. Boomers, who were born during the post-World War II period into the 1960s, often are overwhelmed with the idea of starting all over, Hann says, and worry about lagging behind in technical and computer skills.

“You’re working with a group of people whose parents and grandparents told them, ‘Go to the mills and work, you’ll be working for life.’ When they lose their jobs they ask, ‘Now what do I do?’” Hann says. “There’s a big psychological issue there that you have to deal with, telling them that they’re not a failure, and to pick themselves up by their boot straps.”

This mental aspect of getting over career hurdles is something that more therapists need to be prepared for, says Debra Mucha, a mental health counselor who specializes in trauma therapy.

“A lot of therapists need to have a basis in vocational psychology because a lot of their patients may come in with depression or confusion because of a lost job,” Mucha says.

Mucha knows firsthand the challenges and triumphs of making a radical career change. Having been a court reporter for 12 years, Mucha switched fields to pursue a life-long dream of counseling.

The change didn't come without some doubts, Mucha acknowledges. Career changes can cause the entire family to go through an adjustment period, she says, and reinforce the uncertainty and ambivalence that’s frequently associated with a decision to change careers.

“Job changes affect a person’s self esteem and ego. It affects a spouse, the family dynamic, and power levels, and children,” she explains. “When an individual is changing careers mid-life, they have to be conscious of their own survival needs and cognizant of the other people that are directly connected to them.”
To combat disappointment or negativity while job searching, Hann advises that new job seekers be realistic and patient about the current environment. But they also should remember their strong points and the skills that they've accumulated through the years.

"A lot of folks have been in their career for so many years that they don't realize all of the things that they have done ... that will lead them to another job," he points out.

And a career shift doesn't necessarily have to be a time of anxiety and worry, says Grey, who encourages job seekers to have fun in the mean time and not consume their lives with job searching.

"You have to live and let loose," she says. "In any city, there are free events, community resources and recreation that you can experience for you and your family."