

KEY LESSONS LEARNED IN THE JOURNEY OF CHANGING CAREERS

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I will always look upon my 32nd birthday as one of the best and worst days of my life. I was going to spend the weekend in Rome with one of my dearest friends, and I received a substantial promotion that I had been working towards for the past year. But I found myself crying in the arms of my father as he was telling me how proud he was of me. I felt overwhelmed with what was expected of me and what I truly wanted. When my father asked me what was wrong I finally allowed myself to verbalize my ten years of unhappiness and I said, "I am just not happy in my job. I am not doing what I enjoy". He then said, "Then do what you want to do. Do what makes you happy". I wiped my tears, tucked his advice in my heart and spent eight hours on a plane to Rome contemplating his words. Three weeks later as my father laid in ICU I looked at him and said to myself, "Was he happy"? Would he have done things differently in his life? Is it possible to start over? I discovered over the course of the last five years that the answer to that question is YES. It is possible to start over and find a new, more fulfilling career but like anything worthwhile in life, it takes work. This article is to share some key points that I learned along my journey and help anyone contemplating making a career change.

Do your research.

To make a life-changing decision it is important to have all of the facts. Understand the cost of graduate school or training, find out the salaries in your new field, how competitive it is, etc... Don't trust what schools say! You must do your own research. Shadow someone if possible in your field of choice before committing to spending money on graduate school or training. You will learn more in that one day than you will learn in any class room-you will learn the answer to the question, "Do I really want to do this"?

Yes changing careers is scary!

Once you finally make the decision to even research a career change there is no doubt that you will be become frightened. Change is scary, even for a well-adjusted individual. We as humans don't like change because we don't know what lies ahead. I tell my patients today who struggle with change to remember the words spoken by Martin Luther King, Jr., "You don't have to see the whole staircase. You just have to see the first step". It worked for me and I used it as my mantra.

Get your finances in order.

When I made the decision to leave my job I had no debt. No car payment, no student loans, no credit cards balance...no mortgage. I had no bills coming in the mail except my car insurance and cell phone bill. I was able to leave my rent payments behind and negotiate a lower rate with a family member. I saved enough money to live until I started graduate school in the fall and I broke down what I would need in student loans along

with part-time work to survive over the next few years. It sounds simple-it wasn't. Numbers don't lie and they are scary but I had to remind myself of the goal every time I wanted to buy something that I didn't really need. Making a career change might be minimal if you are still living with family but for those who are living independent, in a relationship and/or have a family, it's not that simple. There will always be bills but it is important to eliminate the ones that are not required for daily living. You need only the bare necessities-food, shelter, utilities, transportation and health insurance. (It is important to note that many graduate schools offer small health insurance plans for students).

Be prepared for a life-style change.

Changing careers means changing your life style. My social life decreased. It became more about phone calls and meeting for coffee than seeing concerts and eating at trendy restaurants. It means staying away from the mall if you know when you go there you can't help but spend money. You have to "know thy self" and what you are willing to sacrifice to get to the goal you desire. If you don't want to adjust your lifestyle - then save more money and wait a bit longer. It's personal choice.

Have healthy coping skills.

I knew the transition from high-paid executive to graduate student was going to be a kick to my ego so I made a plan to keep busy. I rejoined the gym and went every day even if I walked on the treadmill for 10 minutes. I eat when I am stressed or anxious so I needed ways to get out of the house and not eat all day long. I knew that gaining back the weight that I had previously lost was only going to get me more stressed. I set daily goals so I always had an agenda for the day. Prior to starting graduate course work my days were consumed with researching schools, visiting campuses, volunteering and reconnecting with family and old friends. I worked a part-time job for the winter and in the summer I visited family on weekends and took prerequisite classes for my graduate program. Everything was planned. It had to be for me in order to cope. I said many Hail Marys too! You have to have healthy coping skills in order to deal with the stress of the transition properly.

Self-Doubt Will Creep In.

Self-doubt will most certainly creep in! This is why it is so important to have coping skills to deal with all the crazy thoughts and emotions that come along with changing careers. You will have moments when you are thinking, "What the hell did I do"? It's normal. As a mental health professional I encourage you to seek out a therapist to navigate through the anxiety, depression and stress that can surface during a life transition.

Have supportive people in your corner.

When you start telling people you want to change careers, particularly when they know you are successful at what you do, they usually don't hold back their opinion about your

choice. This was one of the hardest things to navigate through because I didn't want to be argumentative. I learned how to gracefully communicate to people that happiness meant more to me than money. There were friends that disappeared or didn't make the effort to contact me so I distanced myself from them because it made me realize...they are not really my friends. I leaned on people that went through similar changes or who loved me and respected my decision.

These are just a few pointers for anyone who might be contemplating a career change. These are lessons I learned from my personal experience but your journey may be different. The important thing to remember is to follow your heart and do what you love. Loving what you do is NOT having a pit in your stomach when you get a promotion. I am glad I made a career change but happier that I had the courage to try and be happy with what I do. I would have rather failed than "never know". As Sigmund Freud said, "Love and work...work and love, that's all there is".

If you are seeking additional guidance, support or encouragement about changing

careers you can contact Jennifer L. DiPerna Soho, LMHC at 718-351-1717 718-351-1717 x19 or help@freedomfromfear.org