Resilience at the Edge of Retirement: Supporting Late Career Transitions

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Overview

- My journey
- Retirement
- Late Career Transitions
- Predictors of Successful Transitions
- Career Shocks
- Coping with Career Shocks
- Building Resilience
- Questions

Consider these stories:

- ***Vignette 1***: Psychologist, worked in a university with a strong pension program, announces her retirement 5 years in advance, taking her last doctoral student, and winding down long engagement with her professional association.
- ***Vignette 2***: Psychologist, worked for a federal agency, plans his retirement in 5 years, receives a promotion, which puts him in the category of probationary employee, is informed he is fired in March.
- ***Vignette 3***: Psychologist, in private practice, plans to retire in 3 years, is suddenly diagnosed with a serious illness and cannot work with her clients. She is not sure she can return to her practice.
- ***Vignette 4***: Psychologist who worked in HR for a large company, took early retirement at 56, planned to move to working for a university, but found limited opportunities due to budget cuts.

My journey– and a disclaimer

Very Traditional Academic Path-– retired last year as a professor of counseling psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Forty years as a professor, teaching some master's students, but mostly as director of training of the doctoral program.

Married (to another professor in the UW system), three sons and daughters in law, three grandchildren (two of whom live in Denmark, one in Milwaukee).

Expert on career development and career transitions, but not on social media or AI

This past year has been a major psychological adjustment.

Disclaimer– I am not a financial expert. But preparing financially is a critically important step. Consult with a financial advisor on your specific circumstances.

Traditional Career Trajectory (Super, et al, 1996)

- Growth (Childhood)
- Exploration (High School and College)
- Establishment (Early Adulthood)
- Maintenance (Adulthood)
- Disengagement (Retirement)

Descriptors of Disengagement Stage (Super, et al, 1996)

- Energy wanes
- Turn tasks to others
- Plan for Retirement or Transition
- Decelerate slowly
- Phasing out –work fewer hours over a period of time
- Bridge Employment –works at a part time job, becomes self-employed,

- BUT– now we know these markers are not invariant across every person or even every career/field at the end of a career

Predictors of Successful Retirement

Social Participation highest predictor of adjustment

Physical Health

Marital Relationship

Finances

Exit Conditions

Psychologists' Retirement (Scroppo, 2020)

Precontemplation

- What financial resources do I need to feel satisfied when I retire?
- What would I like to do if I cut back working so much; what activities or goals would I like to pursue as I get closer to retirement?
- What experiences do I want to have that my work has prevented me from doing? Where do I want to live when I retire?

Retirement is a set of transitions

- Is it voluntary?
- Are you emotionally prepared?
- Is it planned?
- Do you have a professional will?
- Do you know how your records will be handled?

Questions to help plan for Successful Retirement

Will you have enough money for needs and wants?

Do you have a plan if health declines

What hobbies or travel do you envision?

How do you want to spend your time?

Will you be a joiner?

Will you be a volunteer?

How do you manage boundaries?

Can you strengthen social supports?

Can you transition gradually?

BUT

What if it doesn't go according to plan?

What if you start to face age discrimination?

What if you start to feel you DON'T want to or CAN'T work anymore?

You may be facing a late career transition.

What is a late career transition?

- Work- to work-– could be different work, different setting, different location
- Work to non-work- including retirement
- Work to school – either new degree or new training
- Non work to work-- such as returning to work after retirement

Characteristics of Transitions

- Voluntary or involuntary
- Predictable or unpredictable
- Positive or negative
- Amount of time and resources to prepare

When transition is involuntary and unpredictable, leads to a career shock

Career Shock (Akkermans, et al, 2018)

Definition:

"disruptive …events that are, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the …individual's control and that trigger a deliberate thought process concerning one's career"



Need both an external event and reflection on career process

Characteristics of Career Shock

- Value (positive or negative)
- Duration
- Frequency (One time or often)
- Foreseeability (how predictable and how controllable)
- Source (e.g., organizational or family related)

US employment context leading to career shocks

- From January to May, 2025, nearly 700,000 people lost their jobs. 80% increase over 2024 (about the same as occurred during the pandemic)
- Total layoffs likely to be over 2 million
- Sector most hit is technology, followed by federal civil service, retail, and likely to be academic settings by next fall
- COVID-19 continues to have an impact on a number of sectors

(US Department of Labor, 2025)

Reconsider Vignettes

Vignette 1: Work to Nonwork

Psychologist, worked in a university with a strong pension program, announces her retirement 5 years in advance, taking her last doctoral student, and winding down long engagement with her professional association.

- A positive career shock
  - Planned retirement-predictable, one time
  - Positive valence
  - Work to nonwork
  - Source: Self-defined
  - Exit conditions were very good

Vignette 2: Work to ?

Psychologist, worked for a federal agency, plans his retirement in 5 years, receives a promotion, which puts him in the category of probationary employee, is informed he is fired in March.

- Negative Career Shock:
  - Unpredictable,
  - unexpected, negative,
  - unplanned transition,
  - unforeseeable and uncontrollable,
  - source was unexpected
- Work-Nonwork? Or work to work? Work to School?
- How does he decide what to do?

Vignette 3

Psychologist, in private practice, plans to retire in 3 years, is suddenly diagnosed with a serious illness and can no longer see clients. She is not sure she can return to her practice.

Negative Career Shock

- unplanned,
- unknown duration
- unpredicted,
- negative valence
- Unknown source

Work to nonwork?

How does she prepare? She must make a professional will in case she cannot return to practice.

Vignette 4

Psychologist who worked in HR for a large company, took early retirement at 56, planned to work for a university, but limited opportunities due to budget cuts.

- Planned for retirement, planned for financial changes, planned work to work transition, but plans weren't fulfilled.
- Career Shock: unpredicted changes in the university, source was external, valence was negative, and duration was frequent (because was each semester).

How to Cope? Build resilience

APA's definition of resilience:

Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands.

Early Studies on Children experiencing trauma and adversity

Aging specialists began to focus on what resilience means to older adults

Protective Factors for Resilience in Older Adults Scale (Wilson, et al. 2022)

Intrapersonal Resilience: Self efficacy, Independence, Perseverance and Determination, Purpose and Meaning, Positive Perspective

Interpersonal Factor: Sense of Community, Family Support, Friend/Neighbor Support

Spiritual Factor: Faith and Prayer, (But weakly related to other factors)

Experiential Factor: Previous Adversity and Proactivity

Steps in Building Resilience

- Intentional reflection about specific circumstances
- Emotional processing
- If needed, actively acknowledging and process grief
- Increase flexible perspective
- Bolstering social support
- Realign identity if needed
- Examine multiple future pathways, explore options
- Incorporate spiritual factors, if appropriate
- Examine how have dealt with previous adversity

Summary

- Retirement as disengagement
- Predictors of successful retirement: preparation! Financial, time management, social interactions, maintain health
- Late career transitions: Work to work, work to nonwork, work to school, non-work to work
- Career Shock is an external event that triggers career reflection
- If facing a career shock, cope by building resilience
- Focus on emotional reflection, social interactions, past ways to cope with adversity

QUESTIONS

What to think about when your institution offers a one-time supported retirement, before you were thinking of retiring.

I'm unsure if I will return to work. What are the pros and cons to keeping my license active?

What are your best tips for those of us who didn't have time to plan what to do in retirement & who don't have lots of hobbies?

Is there a prepared list of recommended steps for retirement from private practice?

Key References

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