Quit Your Job

A midlife career shift can be good for cognition, well-being, and even longevity.

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PERHAPS YOU ARE one of the lucky ones. Perhaps you have reached your 40s, 50s, or 60s blissfully happy in your job. You are engaged, fulfilled, and challenged. Your work draws on your natural talents and passions. If so, feel free to skip this article.

The rest of us, however, may be experiencing, if not a mid-career crisis, at least mid-career ennui. According to Gallup pollsters, only one-third of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers are engaged by their work. Jim Harter, Gallup's chief scientist for workplace management and well-being, says about half of Boomer and Gen X employees fall in a second category that Gallup characterizes as "not engaged." As Harter puts it, "They show up; they get their paycheck and do the minimum required." And one out of five belongs in the category Gallup calls "actively disengaged," which Harter describes as "a pretty desperate state." This situation exacts a toll on more than just productivity: Gallup has found that, compared with engaged employees, actively disengaged workers of all ages are far likelier to report stress and physical pain. They have higher cortisol levels and blood pressure, and they are nearly twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression or to call in sick.

Employees of all generations are unhappy at work, but those in midlife are slightly unhappier, and for different reasons. Harter says they are particularly likely to complain of feeling "locked into" their careers—stuck in neutral as their junior colleagues zip along. Although the mid-career slump cuts across industries and income levels, he notes that college-educated employees report greater unhappiness than do those who stopped at high school. He believes that highly educated people may have higher expectations, and may therefore find career disappointments more bitter.

Harter's remarks remind me of something Howard H. Stevenson, a Harvard Business School professor emeritus, told me by way of explaining why so many successful professionals run aground on the shoals of midlife ennui.

"There's a difference between 20 years of experience, and one year of experience 20 times," he said. "People do the same thing and they don't grow. They don't face new challenges."

OVER THE COURSE of researching a book on midlife, I interviewed and corresponded with dozens of career experts, psychologists and psychiatrists, and people who had attempted to leap from an enervating career to a more satisfying one.

The inquiry had intensely personal implications. I had worked as a journalist for more than 30 years, nearly 20 of them at National Public Radio. Early on at NPR, I found that the demands of broadcast news took an enormous emotional and physical toll. Eventually (and quite inconveniently, for an on-air radio correspondent) I developed vocal-cord paralysis, which caused chronic throat pain. Deadlines amplified the pain. My situation was untenable.

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I wanted to try something new. But some of the stories I heard from people who'd left one career for another were terrifying: A loan officer who lost her job and earned a "green" business degree had not found work nearly four years later; a construction executive who got a law degree and passed the New York bar was unemployed and selling off her jewelry; a newspaper executive who pursued a writing career found himself making cappuccinos for former colleagues.

Complicating matters, I heard conflicting advice about whether to make a change. For one thing, there is reason to think that midlife discontent may recede with time. Readers of *The Atlantic* may recall Jonathan Rauch's 2014 cover story about the U-shaped happiness curve, a phenomenon characterized by the economists Andrew J. Oswald and David G. Blanchflower. As they noted, even after controlling for differences in wealth, education, and location, people's general contentment hits a low point in their 40s before rebounding in their 50s. Oswald and other scholars have found that our job satisfaction suffers a parallel dip in mid-career, only to swoop upward in our 50s and 60s.

Some researchers believe that the midlife slump is driven by a sense of dashed expectations. According to Hannes Schwandt, an economist at the University of Zurich, as young people, we overestimate our future happiness, and so we feel disappointed as life goes on. But as we approach 60, we start underestimating our future happiness, and then are pleasantly surprised by reality. We also seem to don rose-colored glasses later in life: Brain studies suggest that as we age, we disregard negative images and focus on the positive.

In other words, you may be able to outwait your malaise. Indeed, the particulars of your job may be incidental to it.

And yet, even if you could endure your mid-career doldrums, mounting evidence suggests that you would probably be better off adjusting course. Your next job might not be the one you have imagined in your daydreams: Successful career shifts, I learned, tend to be less dramatic than the ones we fantasize about. They also tend to be scarier and more difficult than anticipated. But if you want to thrive in the years ahead, a new challenge, and a new purpose, may be the things your brain needs most.

RECENTLY, Copenhagen's Happiness Research Institute surveyed 2,600 Danish workers, from every sector and type of job, about the sources of professional contentment. The winner, by a sizable margin, was a sense of purpose, which contributed twice as much to an individual's job satisfaction as did the runner-up, having a high-quality manager.

Meik Wiking, the institute's CEO, notes that Aristotle recognized the close connection between happiness and a sense of purpose. The good life—what the philosopher called *eudaimonia*—is not an easy life, but rather one filled with meaning and striving toward a goal. "We *need* a sense of purpose," Wiking says.

This need, moreover, appears to grow at midlife. As the developmental psychologist Erik H. Erikson observed, at some point in middle age a person begins to shift from investing inward—building a career, raising a family, buying a house, accumulating wealth and prestige—to investing outward and creating a legacy.

A growing "encore movement" is predicated on these ideas, and on the belief that purpose can propel a person through mid-career doldrums. Groups like Encore.org, for example, connect middle-aged and older people with work that promotes the social good; Harvard and Stanford have launched programs that help experienced professionals plot the course to their next calling.

"When people get to their mid-career phase, they want to give back and do something meaningful," says Philip A. Pizzo, the director of Stanford's program, the Distinguished Careers Institute. This is sometimes easier said than done, however. "People become anxious and just start doing things that are not connected or not meaningful," he says—joining a committee here, volunteering there—"just to feel like they are contributing."

Though tuition runs $60,000 a year, the institute has received far more applicants than it can accommodate. Pizzo, who was formerly the dean of Stanford's medical school, hopes the program will be emulated and "democratized" as millions of Baby Boomers and Gen Xers move through the workforce toward retirement. He warns that the alternative—drifting without purpose—is bound to be costly.

His instinct is supported by a growing body of research indicating that having a sense of purpose is a powerful predictor of mental and physical robustness—by some measures, as powerful as education, wealth, genes, exercise, or social network. Compared with people who feel little purpose in life, those who report a strong sense of

purpose are far less likely to die over a given period; they are also far less likely to suffer a stroke or a heart attack, and are less susceptible to viruses and conditions such as diabetes, metastatic cancer, and neurodegenerative disease.

A sense of purpose in life may also stave off the greatest terror of every seasoned adult I know: Alzheimer's disease. Researchers at Rush University Medical Center have found that a third of people whose brains, upon autopsy, display the plaques and tangles of Alzheimer's never exhibited memory loss or intellectual impairment. The best predictor of whether someone would escape these symptoms was whether they felt strongly that they had a purpose in life. Those who did were two and a half times as likely to be unafflicted as those who didn't.

WHICH IS NOT TO SAY that shifting your career path in midlife is easy. Learning anything new past the age of 30 is an upward climb: Researchers have found that some of your cognitive abilities (in particular, processing speed) begin to decline in your 20s and 30s.

In a cruel act of betrayal, the middle-aged brain even turns its singular advantage—our experience—against us. Through a phenomenon known as interference, the expertise we have accumulated can slow further learning. As Sherry L. Willis, a behavioral scientist at the University of Washington, puts it, "Your store of knowledge—the number of file drawers you have to go through to retrieve and to get the relevant information and refile the information—increases with age." This explains, for example, why switching from a PC to a Mac makes people homicidal: The fact that your brain and fingers remember the old key-command system makes mastering the new one more of a struggle.

But even if learning new skills or navigating a new corporate culture is tough, shifting your career may be the best investment you can make in your cognitive health. Paul Nussbaum, a neuropsychologist and co-founder of the brain-training company Fit Brains, notes that after you have mastered a skill, be it balancing the company's books or (in my case) writing a four-minute radio story, that skill becomes "overly learned." "Doing something novel and

complex is going to take some time, it's going to be painful, you're going to cry," he says, only half-joking. Soon, however, you will develop new neural circuits, and your brain will thank you for the effort. Studies of rats have shown that learning an unfamiliar task preserves new brain cells in the hippocampus, an area of the brain key to making and retaining memories. There's a catch, though. "It has to be difficult," says Tracey J. Shors, a professor of neuroscience at Rutgers University. "It has to be engaging. If something is really simple to learn, it's not enough to save those cells from death." You may be able to get through your chaotic middle years on autopilot, but doing so won't help your brain.

People considering a change may also find themselves tripped up by the realistic thinking that is so characteristic of midlife—the very thinking that is a source of their dissatisfaction to begin with. Srini Pillay, a psychiatrist who teaches part-time at Harvard's medical and business schools, says that the moment you consider leaving your flatlining job for a potentially adventurous one, you are likely to erect all sorts of impediments. For example: *How are we going to manage the mortgage?* Pillay advises addressing these concerns directly: *We can move to a smaller house*. His suggestions derive mainly from studies on how to overcome phobias, since no one has scanned a person's brain as she contemplates leaving her job to join a start-up. They nonetheless accord with what career experts almost always recommend to mid-career professionals: Dip your toe in the water before jumping into a new career. Volunteer, take a class, ease into the change.

Another key to a successful transition, one I heard about again and again from scholars and life coaches and people who had successfully changed careers, is making a relatively modest leap. Most people can ill afford to abruptly quit their jobs. If giving notice is out of the question, the experts I spoke with suggest that pivoting inside your organization—that is, tweaking your job—can still bring you a greater sense of purpose.

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"We all have fantasies of total transformation," says Carlo Strenger, a psychoanalyst in Israel who specializes in mid-career change. "You know, those hyper-dramatic changes that the popular press likes a lot, like the lawyer who becomes a chef, and a doctor who turns into an organic farmer. They're really very rare cases."

Instead, Strenger advocates more-realistic goals. A mid-career professional has created enough of a biography to know herself—where she excels and where she flails, what she enjoys and what she dreads—and her insights should guide her next phase. Here Strenger emphasizes the concept of *sosein*, which in German means "essence," or as he translates it, "thus and no other." Your *sosein* is something inborn that is "recalcitrant to change." In other words, he explains, you should change your career within the boundaries of your innate traits and talents.

Finally, the experts I spoke with urge people to start plotting their next stage sooner rather than later, so as to have time to enjoy a couple of decades of meaningful work. At midlife, you have perhaps one good spin left at the wheel. So go for the thing you really want to do. For two years, I listened to people who sought meaningful work in midlife. Few regretted the attempt, even if they failed and returned to their prior work. Failure just sharpened their appreciation for their previous trade. The people who voiced the most regret, I found, were those who never tried.

As for my own career, while I was in the middle of writing my book on midlife, NPR announced that it would offer generous buyouts to employees who were ready to leave. I agonized. But then I realized I had already followed the

advice of the experts I had been interviewing: Several years earlier, I'd tested the waters by taking a leave to write my first book. I had pivoted on my strengths and my experience in using narrative to explore ideas, and I had loved it. I was ready to make the leap.

So I gave up what is arguably one of the best jobs in the world, and started my next chapter. My transition may not sound all that dramatic, but it certainly feels that way.

I am still a little terrified. But one thing I am not is bored.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BARBARA BRADLEY HAGERTY is the author of *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife*.