

A new career can feel like getting a divorce

By Cathy Goodwin

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Cathy Goodwin
cathy@movinglady.com

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Most of us are aware that we need to grieve the death of a close friend, relative or favorite pet. We are beginning to learn that other events -- relocation, divorce, illness -- can also be experienced as loss.

Losing a professional-level career can also be a source of grief, anger and frustration. Starting a business is a death as well as a birth. You may feel as though you are getting a divorce after a twenty-year marriage. Here's why.

1. Sometimes the career leaves you. The field wants "younger people." Or you have to change in ways that violate your sense of self.
2. Sometimes you leave a career that seems perfectly wonderful and fulfilling to those on the outside. "The money's so good," your mother says, "and it's not as if you're scrubbing floors all day. Can't you just hang in there and pretend you like it?"
3. You feel disloyal. After all, you've gained a lot from this career. For the rest of your life, you will view the world through the lens created by your training and experience. You will question assumptions, criticize, challenge, argue, prepare, organize, or negotiate.
4. Friends take sides. After you leave, some former colleagues no longer return your calls. Others try to engage you in a rousing session of "Aren't they horrible," which you don't want either.
5. Those left behind begin to feel abandoned. Are you leaving for a new love, an opportunity that will be livelier, more exciting, and yes, even sexier? Worst case: you're leaving for a new career that your former associates find entirely unsuitable.
6. You have started projects that you will be unable to finish because your new life has no room for them. Anyway, without your former big-name affiliation, you have no credibility to raise them to a level you can present or sell.
7. Your new identity gains you access to new and exciting places, but people treat you differently. You feel naked without the old title on your business card.
8. The rules of the game have changed since the last time you were unattached. And this time around, you're less interested in those "how to get lucky" sessions.

9. You spend more time in the gym. You spend hours walking the dog. You try new hair styles, dare to enter an art gallery, read your first self-help book and consider talking to a professional who bears little resemblance to Jennifer Melfi.

10. You're starting to think, "Being on my own for the rest of my life may not be such a bad thing."

Cathy Goodwin, Ph.D. author, career consultant, speaker

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<http://www.movinglady.com>

Career Freedom Ezine <mailto:subscribe@movinglady.com>

Cathy@movinglady.com 505-534-4294

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