

DO YOU HAVE

*The end of a job can be as devastating as the end of a relationship, so how do you move on? **Lotte Jeffs** reflects on her own break-up story*

I WAS IN THE BACK OF AN UBER en route to Venice Beach from my holiday Airbnb in the Hollywood Hills when I accepted a top job at a global advertising agency in London. I had been fully embracing the LA lifestyle for a month, drinking CBD cocktails and eating charcoal at vegan restaurants. I should have been ecstatic to receive the news. But I couldn't help feeling sad. In SoulCycle classes, as the wheels of my bike spun madly, so did my mind, turning over and over the fact that six weeks earlier I'd taken redundancy from my dream job as the deputy editor of a magazine and feeling a knot of injustice in my stomach. Every night I'd wake up in a cold sweat, having had strange and complex dreams about my old colleagues. It took a good six months for these dreams and repetitive negative thoughts to stop.

In retrospect, I realise that what I was experiencing was career grief, a process of mourning the loss of a job, which, a year on, I've only just come to terms with. Work grief is a modern phenomenon that's rarely spoken about. A YouGov survey found that 49% of British people feel proud to tell someone what they do for a living. So when we lose the job that we feel defines us in this way, what's left?

Samantha Clarke, a "happiness consultant" who coaches both employees and employers, says we need to package up

our emotion, especially grief, before we start a new job. "Who wants to go on a date with someone who moans about their last partner and what they did well or badly?" she says. "Just like relationships, you shouldn't bring old baggage into the new one. Similarly in a new job go in with an open mind and spirit."

I didn't find that easy. For 2½ years I had worked with a team who became some of my best friends. Our job was to talk about big ideas, breaking news, pop culture, celebrities, fashion and our feelings, and then turn these conversations into magazine content. Working there aligned completely with my own interests and passions and made me feel part of something meaningful and important. Of course I fell head over heels. So when I was handed a brown envelope with the news that my job was at risk, I felt as if I'd just had an out-of-the-blue text from a long-term partner saying, "I can't any more. It's over."

Psychologists define the seven stages of grief as shock and denial, pain and guilt, anger and bargaining, depression, the upward turn, reconstruction and, finally, acceptance and hope. It was a trajectory I recognised in myself and one that other women I spoke to have also experienced. One very senior woman in technology, who wishes to remain anonymous, said: "I'd call what I went through after leaving my last job post-traumatic stress disorder as much as work grief."

She had been forced into resigning after being bullied by management. "It felt like a very nasty divorce and deeply impacted my confidence. I spent a lot of time in the denial phases of grief. Now I'm in acceptance, but occasionally I still have

flashes of anger when I run into my former employer. But it's anger that's going to drive me forward into the next roles."

As anyone who has been heartbroken will know, giving yourself fully to someone makes you vulnerable. Care too much and you risk getting hurt. But caring is what makes a relationship — be it with a partner or a job — worthwhile. Vanessa Valley was the global head of business management at Aviva Investors until she quit to start her own business, We Are the City, an online resource for women in the workplace. She started working in the City at the age of 16, so it's no surprise that her business cards were so intrinsic to her identity. "I definitely experienced work grief when I left to start my own business," she says. "I had worked at nine different



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HOW TO CURE CAREER GRIEF

GET CLOSURE

Communicate as honestly as you can your reasons for leaving and your future plans. If you are senior in a company, it's especially important to think about the people you are leaving behind. Fill the inevitable void of gossip and whispering by being open and straightforward. Rather than sending an email rife with professional euphemism — "moving to pastures new" or "taking some time out" — encourage a more open dialogue around the subject of work transition.

DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Taking a completely different role or switching industries stops you from constantly comparing a new job to your last one and can help the process of letting go. Get your sense of self-worth, confidence and kudos from something outside work, be it family, friends, a side hustle or a hobby. Fill your life with things that make you feel good about yourself so work doesn't define you.

GET OVER IT

Losing a job you love isn't the same as losing a person you love, so allow the grief to take up the appropriate space in your life, work through it and then let it go, even if you have to unfollow former colleagues on social media.

banks over 25 years. I was a City girl. It was core to who I was. I felt like I was somebody; I got cabs everywhere, ate in good restaurants, travelled the world — it was all so glam. Then suddenly the phone stopped ringing. It took me two years to adjust to working for myself at home. I was sitting there in my conservatory with my stapler thinking, this is going to be a fun Christmas party, just the two of us."

Clarke, who guides individuals through transitions at all stages of their career, says: "We need to get used to the revolving door of work. It has changed and will continue to morph, and the more adaptable you are, the more you can bounce back and react to changes effectively. With tech and automation shaping work, the future will demand that individuals duck easily in and out of new roles, jobs and companies."

For the anonymous technology executive, the takeaway was to talk more about our emotions in work and when leaving. "It can't be heart-on-your-sleeve or snowflaky — you have to get work done — but absolutely we must be our authentic selves in the office and talk about feelings and what they mean."

I was open about taking redundancy from my magazine job and told my team that I'd be happy to answer any questions they had. I arranged leaving drinks and made a speech; it was important to me not just to shuffle off, but to celebrate what we had achieved together.

There's no such thing as "personal" and "professional" any more. Our lives are one big mess of both, and the "don't ask, don't tell" attitude to work transitions seems out of step with this. Thankfully I'm now in the acceptance stage of work grief. (Occasionally I still feel as if my old colleagues are all dating my ex — I want to know that she's fundamentally OK, because I still care about her, but I'd also quite like to find out she's comfort-eating or has a terrible haircut.) But it has taken me a long time to get there, and I've certainly learnt the importance of basing my self-worth on things other than my career. But I don't regret feeling that passionate about work because, after all, isn't it better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? ■

CAREER GRIEF?