

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

Sometimes, you have to look out for No. 1

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

Last fall I felt burned out at work and spontaneously applied for another job. I was offered a position at a lower salary and accepted. After I made the switch I felt some panic -- it was an excellent job with an academic institution. Although I had already resigned, I approached my former manager and asked for a leave of absence instead. Now I feel torn. The change has been wonderful for my mental health -- I love my new position and am totally and completely enjoying my work life. But it pays about half of what I was earning before. I am a woman in the middle of my career and I have a family. I need to decide soon if I am returning to my previous employer and I worry about the impact this might have on my present employer. I do not know anyone else who has been in this situation and was hoping for some suggestions from you.

-- Anonymous

Dear Anonymous,

If you haven't met anyone else in your situation, you don't get out enough. At least a million Canadian workers are highly stressed and distressed about their work, according to a Stats Can survey released last year. This is a gross underestimate given that burnout and its first cousins -- depression and chronic anxiety -- are the biggest sources of disability claims in North America and Europe. Back pain used to siphon off the big money. Now it's heads, or brains, to be precise. Michael Leiter, the Canada Research Chair in Occupational Health and Well-being, calls the aversive stew of exhaustion, cynicism and lack of efficiency that characterize burnout a "growth area" that affects as many as 10 per cent of the working population.

So unless you live in a bubble, you know people who are burned out and teetering on the edge of a major change. I can reel off about half a dozen in my own circle, many of them highly accomplished professionals or managers in mid-career. I was there myself a decade ago when I started every work day by ramming a pillow over my head when the alarm clock went off. People told me I was very good at my job but I wouldn't have been good at it for much longer if I hadn't dipped my toe in something new.

You may laugh, as I did when I read a tongue-in-cheek account of the latest gloss on burnout, Post-Traumatic Embitterment Disorder, written by Stephen Strauss in this newspaper in 2003. But this month a scientific article showing PTED's overlap with more standard psychological ills appeared in *Psychopathology* -- a reputable, peer reviewed journal. It showed that 52 per cent of those embittered by "a violation of their basic beliefs and values," are clinically depressed, 77 per cent are phobic about work, and that this state lasts an average of 32 months.

That's a long time to feel torn, fearful and preoccupied about how your life decisions affect everyone around you. So my first piece of advice is to winnow down the factors you're throwing into the mix.

Forget about your present and past employers for now. This is about you. Recognizing that a change has been "wonderful" for your mental health and that you "love" your new job are not trifles; these self-assessments are key. You now have to figure out if getting paid half what you were paid before is practical. That's a question for a financial adviser, not a psychologist, so my second piece of advice is to find a good money expert and hie off with your tax documents and budget for a reality check.

Next, think of your family's happiness as connected to your own. This maxim has been mightily abused in the past, but this time it's not just a self-serving bromide for egocentric parents. Evidence from the Sloan Foundation's 500 Family Study, which documented nearly every intake of breath of 500 American families between 2000 and 2005, showed that a woman's involvement with her work affects her adolescents' emotional state.

A mother's satisfaction or resentment about her workday is contagious to teens in a way that a father's is not. So, patently enjoying your work -- its challenges, the ability to make a contribution, or to help others -- can skew your kids' attitudes and motivate them. Finally, a perk for working mothers -- or another source of guilt, depending how you look at it.

The upshot? Look out for Number One.

Otherwise, be prepared to join the embitterment club. It's expensive but inclusive, and by all accounts one of the fastest growing clubs in the Western world.

Dear Susan,

I am a recently graduated English as a Second Language instructor. I love my job but I am unsure about boundaries. Most of the students are close to my age and we have a lot in common. Discussion is mostly one-sided, but they still ask me personal questions about my family, where I live, etc. I am comfortable talking about myself but wonder when it ceases to be professional. I know so many details of my students' lives. How much should they know about mine?

-- The Open Box

Dear Open,

For your safety and comfort, reveal only generalities that won't allow your students to track you down. That may sound like a rigid directive when the need for privacy is just the opposite -- expanding and contracting according to one's personality, culture and the context. Sure, a certain generosity of spirit is necessary in your job. But consider that the purpose of your conversations with these students is to enhance their English fluency, not account for how and where you spend your Saturday nights. You get to decide -- and express in crystal clear English -- that you'd rather not answer that.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.
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