

Career Exploration: Finding Your Passion

by Laura Allan, MA, CPC

Leaving the Familiar, Embracing the Unknown

Martha sits at her desk, dreading yet another day of angry customers, a boss who's impossible to please, and knows that by the end of the day, she'll have eaten too many snacks to fill the empty hole within her. *"Surely, there must be more to life than this – where's that feeling of pleasure I used to feel in just doing the best job I could do?"* she catches herself asking.



Dr. Lewis twirls around in his chair to view the x-rays while his assistant sets up for a procedure. *"I wonder how many fillings I've done in my career,"* he asks himself. *"... and how many more I'm going to do before I retire."* He's surprised at the melancholy that washes over him, but really, these feelings have become more and more frequent. *"I worked so hard and was so proud to become a dentist. This used to be enough – what's happened? What's changed?"*

Martha and Dr. Lewis both are experiencing the first seeds of awareness that something needs to change in their careers. They're both experiencing the first hint that things are not as they should be.

A famous line from a Robert Frost poem reads: *"And if you're lost enough to find yourself ..."*

One could certainly imagine this applying to the life transition that is career exploration! For it's this feeling of being lost that often precludes a period of learning and growth, exciting new directions in our career, and the most wonderful discoveries within ourselves.

It's both exhilarating and scary to begin this search for passion and meaning in our work lives – and one well worth exploring.

Career Exploration As a Life Transition

There's no doubt that career exploration is a transitional period in your life, and whether planned or unplanned, it carries with it conflicting emotions.

If it is a planned process such as graduation from college or the desire for a new career (no matter the precipitating reasons!), there is an undercurrent of excitement to be sure. This doesn't mean that doubt won't crowd your mind from time to time however.

If your career exploration was unplanned by something such as job loss or the death of a spouse, the challenges are all the more difficult. If this is the case for you, you may find the structure and support of a counselor or therapist to be an excellent alternative to going it alone. I'll explain more about how a professional can help you in just a moment.

Seeking a New Direction

Gordon Moore, Founder and Chairman of Intel said, *"It is extremely unlikely that anyone coming out of school with a technical degree will go into one area and stay there. Today's students have to look forward to the excitement of probably having three or four careers."*

The reality today is that each of us will experience a period of career exploration, no matter the field. But the other reality is that preceding this period, feelings of emptiness and lack of motivation often are experienced.

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Still, as Mr. Moore so aptly points out, this transition carries an element of excitement if we allow ourselves to relax and remain open to the immense possibilities before us.

What makes us eager to seek new direction? We generally move through two major phases in our career life, no matter how many individual jobs we may have.

Initially we're motivated by proving our competence in a particular area. Indeed, our monetary and promotional rewards are based on a competency model.

Later in our career, anywhere from about 35 to 55, we begin to feel a stirring that perhaps competence in a certain area isn't enough: we want to be motivated by meaningfulness in our career. And so we begin to search in new directions.

Consider Dr. Lewis whom we met earlier. After 15 to 20 years of doing an identical procedure such as a filling, he's no longer motivated by simply doing a flawless job, so he begins to search for ways in which he can stretch and grow. In addition to an entirely new career, options for him might include mastering advanced cosmetic procedures or expanding into oral surgery – something to awaken the passion once more.

The point is, at a certain stage in our careers, after we've mastered the task at hand, we begin to search for more. This transitional time is discomfoting to be sure, but necessary for our growth.

Maximize Your Chance for Success

Focus and direction are two major factors in your career exploration and this is often best gained by counseling with a trained coach or therapist who can help move you consistently forward.

Your path to your new career is unique and a trained professional can help you with accountability. Your therapist can provide assessment tools and strategies to help you uncover your strengths, interests, and training requirements for the new career you're considering.

Obstacles are defined and strategies developed to help you move toward your goal – and your new career – with determination!

Self Care Strategies

Make use of self-care strategies, particularly during this time. Your transition into a new career will take time and effort and while you'll likely strive to fill the gaps of time that result from one transition to another, try to avoid doing so. This is a time of learning and growth, of further defining who you are and your personal uniqueness.

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Laura Allan is a Registered Counselor and Certified Professional Coach. She has a M.A. degree in Applied Behavioral Science with concentration in Systems Counseling from Bastyr University. She also has a B.S. degree from Washington State University and an M.S. from Seattle University. She has additional specialized training in working with couples and eating disorders. You may visit her website at www.LauraAllanCounseling.com.