

Hitting rock bottom after job loss can be beneficial, study shows

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We've all heard it said, "When you hit rock bottom, there's nowhere to go but up." This can prove especially true in business, where bottoming out as a result of job loss can be necessary before finding the radical solution that will lead to a new work identity, according to new research from the University of Notre Dame.

"Hitting Rock Bottom After Job Loss: Bouncing Back to Create a New Positive Work Identity," was published this month in *Academy of Management Review* by lead author Dean Shepherd, the Siegfried Professor of Entrepreneurship in Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, and Trenton Williams of Indiana University.

"On the way down, we frantically do all sorts of things to try and repair the situation, and suffer as they fail," Shepherd says. "Bottoming out frees us from the misconception that the problems can be fixed, and in the process, frees us from other constraints and [negative emotions](#) and provides the conditions necessary to find a viable solution."

Individuals who eventually hit rock bottom come to realize their identity has been lost, and that realization can lead to one of two paths: toward recovery or toward dysfunction.

"Using 'identity play' provides a safe environment to escape the situation and try new things, discarding bad ideas or finding and refining a new identity and returning stronger than before."

Play provides an opportunity to both withdraw from the mental anguish and to be creative in generating alternative new work identities and then trying them out to see how they feel without having to commit to them, which can be fun.

Once the individual finds a potential identity that feels right, they then begin to refine the job to make sure it's a good fit for both their needs and the reality of the situation. Without hitting rock bottom, the individual would not have been freed from the past to enable them to creatively explore different alternatives for the future.

"A failed corporate executive might consider a variety of other potential roles," Shepherd says, "For example, sitting on the board of a nonprofit organization that is desperate for experienced managerial guidance, exploring government positions or running for office, working with startups, and so forth. Similarly, a failed entrepreneur might explore how skills learned in starting a business could be applied in a corporate setting, take standardized exams to be considered for law school or engage in other low risk exploration activities. In these cases, hitting rock bottom opens up myriad new opportunities."

Former NFL players Jermichael Finley, Mike Utley and Tony Boselli all suffered career ending injuries and have refocused on other business ventures. Finley, in his 20s suffered a spinal cord injury while playing as a tight end for the Green Bay Packers. He is now coaching and invested in a gym. Utley played guard for the Detroit Lions when a game injury left him paralyzed. He started the Mike Utley Foundation. Boselli was a defensive tackle for the Jacksonville Jaguars who retired early due to a nagging shoulder injury. He's now 45 and admits he still suffers from an "identity crisis" but continues working with the Jaguars on their Sunday radio show as well as other radio shows including Westwood One. He also coaches high school football and started a small healthcare company.

The less desirable path involves using fantasy as a means of escape and can include alcohol and drug use.

Along this less desirable path, "people will oscillate between no emotion and severe negative emotion and make no progress toward building a new identity, which can eventually lead to even worse outcomes like suicide," Shepherd says.

Recent studies have explored the impact of career-ending injuries for musicians and soldiers—injuries that generated intense negative emotions as they approached rock bottom. In both studies, some of these individuals were fixated on the loss of a former identity, paralyzed by the realization that they could no longer perform or continue in an established role. Some sought escape through cognitive deconstruction, including the use of drugs.

"A failed executive might resort to a numb state that involves abusing alcohol, engaging in menial tasks at home or becoming a couch potato," Shepherd says. "However, when friends offer job suggestions or ask why the executive has yet to land a new position, it could launch the individual from the numb state into extreme negative emotions leading to destructive behavior."

A deeper understanding of why some recover and others languish provides an opportunity to develop interventions that facilitate recovery from work [identity](#) loss.

Shepherd hopes the research helps people realize that hitting rock bottom can be an opportunity to let go of a broken and unrepairable life and begin anew to develop a new life, as well as avoid the negative path of fantasy that obstructs recovery.

A research leader in the field of entrepreneurship, Shepherd specializes

in entrepreneurial cognitions, new venture strategy, opportunity recognition and learning from failure.

Provided by University of Notre Dame

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