



To Find Your Dream Career, Show Your Unconscious Who's Boss

The social pressures you think are holding you back are most likely your own projection.

In a 2010 Deloitte survey, 80 percent of workers reported **unhappiness in their jobs**. In another survey, 52 percent said they would **start over if they could**. Yet the number of resignations remained very low until the pandemic hit. Why do so many people hesitate to leave unfulfilling careers?

Research suggests that your intimates – spouses, bosses, close friends and parents – hinder your transition. **Herminia Ibarra argued**, “When it comes to reinventing yourself, people who know you best are also the ones most likely to hinder rather than help.” She highlighted that they would pressure you to stay the same, even by saying, “You are out of your mind.”

But the real story is much more complex. As **Kyung Min found** while studying the voluntary career transitions of 23 executives for her INSEAD’s **Executive Master in Change (EMC)** thesis, the perceived social pressure is often partly, if not wholly, conjured in the minds of the career-changers themselves. With the proper understanding, they can prevent feeling swamped and stymied by these negative emotions.

Social pressure in mind

Some of Kyung’s interviewees proceeded with their transition without being hindered by their intimates’

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adverse reactions, whereas others were affected despite support and encouragement. One executive recalled his peers telling him, “I admire you so much for your courage to become an entrepreneur.” Rather than feeling emboldened, he perceived pressure to match their admiration. It suggests that how others react to your transition doesn’t matter. How you interpret their reaction does.

The root is not in the other’s response but instead, in your internal struggles, heightened by unconscious fears and anxiety about what others will think, say and do. An aggravating factor can be a complicated history with the person from whom you’re seeking support; for instance, a critical father, a mother who has been treating you as a trophy child, or a friend who’s been envious of you.

The unconscious ambush

When approaching your close friends and family, you have certain expectations about how they might respond. It’s a product of your past relationship patterns etched with hidden motivations and beliefs. For instance, if you remember your dad as critical of you, that memory makes you anticipate more of the same, influencing your emotions and behaviours. With this tension in play, the more you get anxious or under pressure, the more you become defensive. Freud defined these mental models and behavioural coping responses as defence mechanisms, such as

projection, denial or avoidance. The tricky part is that you are not aware of what's going on.

Once triggered, the next thing you do is interpret the response in a way that justifies your provoked emotions. Examples from the interviews: "My parents would've been happier if I had a normal job"; "I believed my friends disliked my transition as they always expected me to be a corporate executive"; or "My father wouldn't have cared anyhow because I was a failure to him." These interpretations are, by nature, a prediction-based judgment. You are aware of "what" you are judging, but "why" you interpret that way seems unknown. Such an automatic process serves the unconscious motivation to justify your feelings, at the risk of developing ego defences, distorted thoughts or projections.

But, watch out. These defensive responses work to stimulate you further, establishing your beliefs that 'they' are hindering you. This influences your future approach to them and can develop into a toxic process with ongoing vicious cycles. The result is unconscious self-sabotage.

Taking personal control of pressure

Of course, not all social pressure is a figment of your imagination. It may be real, in whole or in part. Nonetheless, you get to control how you process it.

As you disrupt your long-held professional identity and shared history, your loved ones may feel as uncomfortable as you do. Whether well-intended or otherwise, any sign during interactions can trigger you. And very often, we interpret the other's discomfort or concern as disappointment or disapproval. It's crucial to exercise empathy and remember that the proposed change in your life can affect those close to you. What matters most is your ability to stay in control of your agency against the unconscious mental hijack. It's about knowing what lies beneath your feelings and thoughts so you can manage it better.

"Acting-in"

What can you do about the unconscious threat? Here are ways you can clear your mental space and increase your self-control, namely "act-in" strategies.

1. Know your triggers and patterns

Each of us has a history in terms of the social role we play in relationships – for example with family or with peers. Your behavioural and emotional patterns prevail in how you interact with these people, often at the cost of unconscious drama. Knowing your triggers is a first step to avoid these patterns.

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One of the tools coaches use with clients is a "**role biography**" exercise". You draw your self-image at different stages of your life: at age six, sixteen and when you started your career. For instance, a charming trophy daughter who kept parents proud and happy or a straight-A performer. How you see yourself in relation to others can mirror your experience of the relationship. Therefore, this exercise helps you to review your history in relationships and to identify triggers and recurrent patterns. In doing so, you can make sense of how it influences your perceived social pressure and thus increase self-control.

2. Practice impulse control

We call our sudden drives to react an "impulse." If your impulse is activated, you are more likely to "act out", riding on the highway to an unconscious spiral. When triggered, try to hold your emotional response and do a quick reality test. Look for objective data to verify your thoughts and feelings. Challenge your interpretation by asking hard questions such as, "How do I know my dad meant it that way? What's the data to suggest it?" A practice of impulse control is central to managing your behaviours and emotions, preventing you from falling into invisible traps.

3. Step into your transitional space

A moment of struggle might still return. Creating inner transitional space to meditate might help you to keep track of your internal dialogue. This purposeful introspection can raise your awareness of why you feel and think the way you do. You can create the transitional space anytime, anywhere, as long as you can concentrate. For example, you can be mindful when you're walking, breathing in fresh air, and not just in the yoga studio.

You can also harness **reflective social interactions** to co-create a transitional space – working with someone neutral as a sounding board – and explore both conscious and unconscious. For example, **the EMC programme** is designed to provide a psychologically safe and supportive space for participants to look within and examine aspects of their unconscious that would go unnoticed in everyday life.

In summary, the unconscious manifests in our lives. It has significant implications for our experience of social pressure at work and in life, during career transitions and beyond. This awareness won't liberate you from the unconscious, but it will help you be the conscious creator of your life and career journey.

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