

I had to redefine my identity after mental illness ended my career

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Written by **Sarah Bones**

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Content warning: mentions of suicide.

In 2018, at the age of 33, the career I had worked years to establish ended both prematurely and unceremoniously. I quit my well paid job due to stress and poor mental health, and have not worked full-time since.

For a long time, I had worked in Higher Education, gradually climbing my way up through the ranks at a local university. During this period, I struggled with bouts of depression and anxiety, but somehow managed to keep it all together. Feelings I had long kept buried were at odds with the pressure of my stressful career, and events were seemingly catalysed by my appointment as the manager of a new academic department. It was a very high profile role, but the ambitious, career-driven part of me was excited for the challenges involved with taking on the numerous and complex tasks needed to succeed.

Less than a year later, in March 2018, I had a breakdown and quit the role after two months of sick leave due to the deterioration of my mental health. In an episode that could be plucked straight from the pages of a novel akin to *Gone Girl*, these events unfortunately culminated in me going 'missing' for a day and the police having to trace my location.

I have always placed a lot of emphasis on having a career, and frequently found myself defining my worth using 'traditional' indicators of success. I remember reading university prospectuses for fun in college and dreaming of all the higher education career paths that could help me to realise my dreams. The hard part was deciding which path to take: making decisions and sticking to them has never been my forte.

Having my first child in 2013 seemed to be the catalyst for change, and for some reason becoming a mother lit a fire under me – I wanted to be more (which included earning more) for both myself and my family.

By the time I had finished my BA and, later, an MA in Literature, I still had no idea what I wanted to do for a career. I tentatively began a PhD, but realised too late that I'd had enough of studying, and instead wanted to get a full-time job and move in with my boyfriend (now husband), in order that I would finally 'become' an adult.

After a period of unemployment, I was offered an administration job at the university I had studied at; this is where I stayed for the next ten years. I started at the bottom, staying rather comfortably at the same level for five years before deciding to move on up. Having my first child in 2013 seemed to be the catalyst for change, and for some reason becoming a mother lit a fire under me - I wanted to be more (which included earning more) for both myself and my family.

After that I progressed quickly, not staying in each role for long before deciding to ascend a step higher. Our next child came along two years later and I was back at work after only four months, mainly for financial reasons but also because I had never wanted to be a stay at home mum.

Below the surface, my depression and anxiety, which had established their roots in my teens, were always there, bubbling away and threatening to overflow.

I was enjoying my career, having moved into a deputy manager role, and felt more confident and assertive since becoming a mother. My husband Mark had become the part-time worker in the family and did the majority of the childcare, whilst I gave my all to a full-time career. We were happy with this - it was our choice, and it worked for us - until it didn't.

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2018 was the turning point in which everything I had previously worked to build came crashing down. Opening an entirely new academic department is no mean feat and there were many financial, logistical and other barriers to overcome. I initially rose to the challenge, enjoying the autonomy in organising my workload and making significant decisions. I felt a huge sense of pressure and expectation given the high profile nature of the role. I began to feel more and more anxious, and ultimately depressed.

In January that year, I decided to speak to a doctor about how I was feeling, and was signed off work with stress and depression. I was still signed off sick by the time we moved and I told Mark I couldn't carry on the job anymore; I felt completely depleted, and could not cope with taking everything so personally due to my over-sensitive nature. I resigned at the beginning of April.

I had secured another job in charity recruitment to go straight into, although it would mean a substantial salary drop. Mark was incredibly supportive though, as always, and said we would make it work. But things didn't go according to plan.

I left the house in my car, without taking my purse or phone. I'm not sure what my intentions were that day but I drove for hours.

My anxiety and guilt over letting my family down were out of control on that first day in my new job, but I got through it somehow. The next day though, I could not bring myself to go in and sat in my car in the multi-storey car park for hours, knowing my new colleagues would be wondering where I was. I eventually went home and told Mark I was not well mentally, which of course, he already knew.

The next day, my mental state completely deteriorated after a huge row between us erupted due to me going back on a promise to see my doctor. I left the house in my car, without taking my purse or phone. I'm not sure what my intentions were that day but I drove for hours, occasionally stopping to sob or lie down.

I hadn't gone off somewhere to end my life, which Mark was obviously concerned about, but simply to escape. In the late afternoon, I was woken from a nap by a policeman knocking on the car window; the officers were kind and understanding as they drove me home. When I arrived, my two sisters were just leaving with our boys, taking them out to the park for a while so they wouldn't see their mother coming home in a police car.

I'll never forget that day. It was my rock bottom; I had lost everything I'd worked so hard for whilst, as I saw it, taking my family down with me.

I'd love to say it's been a linear path to recovery since then, but in reality there have been many ups and downs as I have tried to find myself again. I had to accept the loss of my previous management career and start at the bottom again.

However, it was during this time that I realised I wanted to start my own business and ultimately work for myself. It was then that I first started writing alongside my job, blogging about my life and topics that interested me.

Writing has been my saving grace since that difficult time, allowing me to organise my chaotic thoughts into something more meaningful. Words are how I manage my feelings, and I always feel so much more intact after I've poured them out onto the page.

I've now decided to focus completely on working as a freelance writer. Self-employment is better for my mental health; I don't like being told what to do or having someone breathing down my neck, and I like to organise my own time and priorities.

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I learnt a lot from hitting that lowest point, including how much I was loved when everyone rallied round me. I learnt that it is actually okay to not have a 'traditional' career anymore. What are the markers of a successful career these days, anyway? Will linear career paths even exist in the same sense after a global pandemic has established itself so remarkably, that it has induced society into changing and adapting to new ways of working?

I realised that our careers do not have to define us completely. Our identities are fluid; without having to compartmentalise, I am at once a mother, a wife, a sister, a friend, a daughter, a writer, and many other things.

I realised that our careers do not have to define us completely. Our identities are fluid; without having to compartmentalise, I am at once a mother, a wife, a sister, a friend, a daughter, a writer, and many other things. Self-employment has allowed my sense of self to flourish as it has enabled me to merge the various parts of my life in a way which totally suits my working habits. As such, the other parts of my life have been brought to the fore a bit more, and given a bit more care and attention.

Without a doubt, the biggest lesson I learnt is that we can start again if we need (or want) to, and we should not torture ourselves over leaving a situation which is doing us more harm than good. We, as human beings, are capable of assimilating new information and learning new skills - it is perhaps the most wonderful thing about us as a species. When one thing ends, a space is created for something else; perhaps this is something to remember as we face this uncertain future collectively.

Sarah Bones is a personal essay, features and opinion writer. @Sarahboneswrite



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