

What It's Like to be an Unemployed Post-Grad

By: Sarah Silcox

Guilt. Anxiety. Uncertainty. These are three emotions I have come to know well in the months since graduating from college. I often feel guilty about whether or not I've applied for enough jobs, networked with enough people, or researched enough companies in a given week. I commonly feel anxious about whether or not companies will call me back or if I will stay in touch with friends from college. I am uncertain about every single thing in my life--from who I am as a person to what I'll be doing with my life in five years, hell even what I'll be doing next week.

As an undergraduate, I heard countless stories from professors, family members, co-workers and older friends about the competitive job market and the stark realities of the "real world", but I worked hard to prepare myself for life after college. I kept my grades up, went to some networking events and even completed a few internships throughout my time as an undergraduate.

During my last year as a college student, feelings of anxiety began looming around inside my head. People I knew were beginning to get job offers, excitedly posting their good fortune across their social media networks. While I was trying to cope with the fact that my years as a student were coming to an end, my friends and classmates seemed to have already started making plans about what to do after turning in their graduation gowns in May.

Feelings of existential dread were commonplace, and late night drives became my therapy. For a time, I was able to relieve some of my nerves by driving the tranquil streets of Bloomington, Indiana, with my windows down and my music loud. Of course, these late night drives were fleeting and I still managed to spend much of my last semester of college worrying about my future, while not doing anything particularly constructive to propel myself forward.

After giving myself what I considered to be a "much-deserved" break, I constructively started my job search about two months after my graduation. I began aimlessly sending out my application materials to positions I found on LinkedIn and Indeed, mostly to large media companies where the applicant pools had to be in the thousands. I spent countless hours writing cover letters that were most likely never read and kept track of my progress with a spreadsheet in Google Drive.

I set up informational interviews with old bosses and co-workers, mutual friends and industry professionals, eager for networking practice and insight into the job market. Subconsciously, I think I was hoping for someone to tell me what to do, where to move, or what career path to pursue. While I thoroughly enjoyed talking to people and learning about their careers, I soon realized that no one's career path is the same, and that for maybe the first time in my life, I needed to start making major life decisions on my own. Sure, I chose what high school to

attend, where to go to college and what major to study... but those decisions were highly influenced by my parents, practicality and finances.

Talking to people made me realize the sheer vastness of career possibilities out there, that there are jobs that I am interested in now that did not even exist fifteen years ago. I talked to a woman that switched career paths and decided to go to film school when she was forty-eight years old. I talked to a woman who started as a paralegal, but then took an interest in radio and now works as a freelance podcast producer in Los Angeles. I talked with a man who has written children's books, worked at a renowned children's museum, improved a city's Parks and Recreation Department and now serves as the president of an acclaimed Midwestern film festival. I talked with people who have worked at the same company for more than twenty-five years and people who have been jumping from job-to-job for most of their lives. Doing so many informational interviews made me realize a few important things:

- (1) There is no one correct way to pursue the job that you want and it is more common now than ever before to follow a non-linear career path.***
- (2) No one can tell you what to do; you have to figure it out for yourself.***
- (3) Your first job out of college does not have to determine the rest of your career.***
- (4) If you absolutely hate a job, you can quit.***
- (5) Take any interview request you are offered; consider them all practice for the interview that leads to your dream job.***
- (6) If you are interested in a job, apply for it; don't tell yourself that you are not qualified for the position-- that is for the hiring manager to decide.***
- (7) Follow your gut and try your best not to overthink things.***
- (8) Reach out to companies, organizations and people that interest and inspire you. The worst thing that can happen is that they do not respond.***
- (9) Stay humble, arrive early, leave late, take initiative and do not be too proud to make the coffee runs.***
- (10) Ask questions, stay genuine and don't give up.***

After a summer of informational interviews, submitting blind applications and several small nervous breakdowns, I was still struggling to gain traction within the job market and could not find it within myself to commit to moving to a new city. So, like many of my fellow recent

graduates, I moved back home with my parents. I took a deliberate break from the job hunt and started thoroughly researching trips to Europe, something I had been wanting to do for several years. I was fortunate enough to find a way to make it work and packed my bags for my first trip across the pond, completely alone but with an eagerness to broaden my world and leave the stress of finding a job behind, if only for 19 blissful days.

I returned with a widened perspective, new friends abroad, a sinus infection and a renewed sense of self, ready to take the job market head-on. With the help of many supportive family members, mentors and babysitting clients, I began getting leads to a number of job openings that appealed to me and I was finally getting calls for interviews. Out of all the jobs I have applied for, the great majority of responses I have gotten, even if just for an initial interview, have been at companies where I know an employee or have a mutual friend at a company, further proving that:

(1) Networking is crucial. You heard it in college and you hoped it wasn't true, but let me tell you from experience: it most certainly does not impair your chances.

(2) Sometimes you need to know someone at a company just to get your resume seen.

(3) When looking for a job (especially your first one), be sure to ask your extended family, friends, previous co-workers, friends' parents, etc. if they know of any job openings or people at interesting companies in your industry. Trust me: it can save you immense amounts of time and energy, not to mention your sanity, as you decrease the chances of your carefully written cover letters disappearing into the blackhole of Internet job databases.

Even when I began interviewing at a fairly steady pace, I soon learned that nothing is guaranteed; sometimes interviews go well and lead to job offers, but oftentimes a company will decide to go with a candidate with more experience. I learned that although every interview is different, it is always important to come well-prepared, enthusiastic and confident in yourself. And as much as interviews are about selling yourself and allowing an interviewer to examine your qualifications for an open position, interviews are your chance to ask questions and decide whether or not a company is the right fit for you.

If you are lucky enough to get to the interview stage, you still have a long way to go. You may get called back for a second round interview or you may not even get a response. Even if you are continually putting out feelers in the job market, you will still have a lot of time on your hands; you are unemployed, after all. But please, learn from my mistakes: stop feeling bad for yourself. For once in your life, you have time on your hands. Time to pursue your interests, read books, explore your city, do things with your family, travel, volunteer, make new friends, learn to cook,

and most importantly, actually **think** about your life and reflect on the things that are important to you.

It's easy to feel bad about yourself as an unemployed post-grad, but I challenge you to think about how far you have come and how much you already have to be grateful for at this stage in your life. I am one of the lucky ones: I got into a college that I wanted to attend, chose a creative major that interested me, felt supported by my parents and left college feeling like I had grown into a more well-rounded and adaptable person than I had been four years before. There are many people who would love to change places with us--young, recent graduates, full of big ideas, ambition and our entire lives ahead of us.

I'm not saying the first few years after college will be easy. Remember how difficult it was to adjust to your freshman years of high school and college? Think of this time as your freshman year in life. Things are going to be uncomfortable for awhile; your life is in flux. My aunt gave me some great advice, saying that now is the perfect time to start living your life attempting to "be comfortable with being uncomfortable."

Life is full of uncertainty and everything you are feeling is completely normal. If you feel like you are going through a quarter-life crisis, I can assure you that you are not alone. After experiencing numerous conversations with friends, it is clear that almost everyone I know is feeling lost right now, even the ones with steady jobs and lofty ambitions. I would be lying if I told you there are not days when I am so depressed about the state of my life that I can hardly pull myself out of bed or days when the only people I want to be around are my favorite television show characters. Now even more than usual, I am prone to cry at the drop of a hat; a friend of mine even said she started wearing sunglasses everywhere because she was continually bursting into tears while walking down the street. But what I have been trying to come to terms with is that we have our whole lives ahead of us: we should try to be excited about all the possibilities, not debilitated by them. I've been learning that no one has it all figured out, and we are all making it up as we go along.

These last several months have been hard, but I have no doubt that they have been meaningful. The months since my graduation have served as a formative transitional period in my life and I have been able to use my time to do some reflecting, coming up with a list of goals and advice for myself and hopefully anyone who is sharing in the experience:

(1) Try not to waste all your precious "free time" worrying about the future.

(2) Be constructive with your time, but also set aside moments for improving yourself and enjoying life.

(3) Practice mindfulness, be present and try to live your life as it is happening right now.

(4) Spend some time babysitting; hanging out with three year olds will make you realize how fun, exciting and stress-free life can be.

(5) Think about your goals for the future, but keep them vague and open to change.

(6) Be ambitious and try your best not to become jaded.

(7) Keep your head up, stay confident in your abilities and always be open to learning new things.

(8) Stop comparing yourself to others. Seriously--stop that terrible habit right now.

(9) Don't be too hard on yourself.

(10) Stay true, stay genuine and keep telling yourself, "everything is going to be okay."

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