PRACTICAL ADVICE ON TRANSITIONING FROM TRAUMA TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

February 8, 2014

DEAN A. SHEPHERD
David H. Jacobs Chair in Strategic Entrepreneurship
Kelley School of Business
Indiana University
Kelley School of Business
1309 E. Tenth St.
Bloomington, IN 47405
shepherd@indiana.edu

You are free to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work under the condition that you give the original author credit. Cite as the following:


Keywords: Trauma; Major Career Change; Injury; Disability; Military; Entrepreneurship; Self-employment
A PRACTICAL NOTE FOR TRANSITIONING FROM TRAUMA TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Unfortunately, many people are injured sufficiently bad enough that they cannot continue their current career; they face the challenges of both dealing with a traumatic injury and losing the career they loved. This includes military personnel injured in combat, professional athletes or performers who experience career-ending injuries, and others whose injuries preclude them from continuing with their beloved career. The normal career advice about career progression just doesn’t seem to apply.

Flowing from my research (listed below) I offer the following advice for people who have faced traumatic ends to their careers:

1. **Trauma shatters our fundamental assumptions**
   Injuries that necessitate a major career change can have a profound impact on us; they can shatter our fundamental assumptions that the world is a kind and meaningful place and that the self is worthy. When these assumptions of the world and self are shattered, we feel helpless and vulnerable. This is a tough place to be, and loved ones have a hard time helping us. Although it may provide little comfort to those in this space, these shattered assumptions and feelings of helplessness are normal—they occur for many people who face a traumatic event. Rebuilding these shattered assumptions is key before we can make any career-related progress; these assumptions provide the foundation upon which we can build a new career.

2. **Rebuild shattered assumptions as a foundation for a new career**
   Our career and identity are inextricably intertwined. When we lose our career, we lose a part of our identity, often a large part. Under these circumstances, we face both the direct loss associated with injury and the indirect effects of a loss of identity. Recovery needs to start by rebuilding our fundamental assumptions about the world and the self. We can do this by creating a story about our self and our situation. By constructing a story about our past, we are able to give the injury and the need for career change some meaning. As we develop understanding through the creation of a more plausible story, we are able to re-establish our beliefs that the world is a kind and meaningful place and that the self is worthy of good things. However, creating a story that provides meaning and a basis for re-establishing fundamental assumptions is easier said than done. Next, I provide some advice for taking on this important but difficult challenge,

3. **Dis-engage but then re-engage**
   After facing a traumatic incident, a story explaining the event is not going to come easily nor immediately. We need to take some time to recover from our injuries as well as to distract ourselves from thinking about the event and even from thinking about the future. We need to hang out with friends who can help distract us from the event and its negative consequences. However, after a period, we need to begin to re-engage. We must re-engage with our own thoughts to try
and make meaning from what happened to us and why it occurred. We should tell others our story to inform our narrative and adapt it based on feedback. It will become more plausible. This is tough work, and we may require some periods of rest—distraction—before once again working on the story. The more plausible the story, the more it helps to re-establish our fundamental assumptions of the world and the self—the foundation necessary before we can make career-related progress.

4. **Seek self-employment to overcome career obstacles**

Self-employment is often an attractive career alternative for people who face large career changes, especially those necessitated by injury. Self-employment is often attractive because it does not have many of the obstacles to people living with injuries and disabilities that employees face. Self-employment gives greater flexibility for dealing with physical limitations and perhaps also for accommodating treatment and rehabilitation. However, this entrepreneurial career choice can provide other psychological benefits, such as the need for autonomy, a need that could have been heightened by the traumatic event (e.g., following orders led to the injury) or heightened by the period of treatment and physical rehabilitation (e.g., how constantly following orders from doctors and nurses to address the injury led to decreased feelings of autonomy).

5. **Pursue your passion**

Entrepreneurship enables us to pursue our passion. In turn, the pursuit of passion enables us to bring energy and enthusiasm to crafting our entrepreneurial business, thereby helping us begin to establish a new highly desirable (to us) career. We often hear about following our passion, but the termination of our previous career affords us the opportunity to pursue this passion more than people who are somewhat locked into their career path despite not being highly passionate for it. I realize it is quite an optimistic perspective to say that the closing of one door opens another door when an injury is so traumatic, but behind most major threats are also opportunities if we are willing to identify, nurture, and pursue them.

6. **Think more deeply about your career experiences**

We have established considerable knowledge from our previous careers and have perhaps also gained some knowledge from our experience coping with the traumatic event. How this knowledge applies to a new entrepreneurial career might not be immediately apparent. Indeed, on the surface, the knowledge that we have and that required by the new career might seem completely different. However, a change in perspective can help with this. We need to think more abstractly (i.e., at a higher level) about the source of our knowledge (e.g., past career and/or coping with the injury) and about the target of that knowledge (i.e., our new business). For example, on the surface, there are few skills transferable from the previous role of
sniper in the Army and a new role as entrepreneur. However, at a more abstract level, there are many skills that are transferable, such discipline, commitment to excellence, attention to detail with the operational effectiveness of equipment, and dealing with adversity. As we are able to see the link between our past and our new career and see how our knowledge, skills, and experience are transferable, we will gain more confidence in developing our new career. Confidence goes a long way in directly overcoming obstacles and in convincing potential stakeholders to provide their critical resources.

7. Please seek help from others
My advice does not substitute for the help of loved ones, friends, and professionals. People want to help you. Often, however, they do not know how to help. Hopefully the points above can form the basis for discussions, but, please, if you feel things are getting to be too much for you, reach out to someone—reach out to a professional. There is nothing wrong with receiving help when going through a tough time.

A traumatic event can lead to the loss of a valued career and a sense of identity. Under these circumstances we need to rebuild our fundamental assumptions about the world, others, and ourselves. We also need to alternate between periods of engaging with, and disengaging from, the traumatic event to develop a plausible story of the past as a basis for building a positive future. We recognize that self-employment helps us to both overcome some of the major physical and psychological barriers faced by employees and facilitate the pursuit of our passions. To pursue self-employment as a career we need to think more deeply about our previous career (knowledge, experience and skills) and about how it might be applied to an entrepreneurial career. To successfully make the transition to self-employment will require help from others; make the most of people who are willing and able to help.

Bibliography
The motivation for this note was to share some of the practical implications of my research, specifically: