



The Athena Wellness Podcast
Episode 201 – Identity Loss in Times of Career Transition
May 24, 2023

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[00:00:05] Kathy Robinson: Welcome to The Athena Wellness Podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

[00:00:30] Kathy: Hello and welcome friends. Thanks so much for joining me for this shortened Wellness Wednesday episode, a little midweek boost to help keep your Warrior Vibe high.

Today's show is a Walking The Talk Vancast, a look behind the scenes into what I'm learning and working through along with a takeaway for you. These portable episodes are informal and casual, recorded on the go from wherever I happen to be at the time. And today after a long van roadtrip, I'm home, outside on my deck enjoying a beautiful 70 degree day.

[00:01:09] A recurring theme in my work with students and clients these days is the impact of identity loss in times of life transition. It's especially surprising when this occurs after leaving a long-time career, even when you made the decision to



leave. So today, I'd like to explore what identity loss is, how it can affect you, and what you can do to work with it.

Identity loss is a state of confusion or uncertainty about your sense of self. It can be caused by a variety of factors, including major life changes, such as retirement, job loss, divorce, or death of a loved one. It can be caused by trauma, such as abuse or war. Or mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, even by substance abuse, aging, and societal expectations.

You experience a sense of identity loss when going through a major life change because these transitions often involve a shift in roles, relationships or responsibilities. It's this shift that can lead to a sense of confusion, uncertainty and even fear about who you are and what you want.

Here are some signs and symptoms of identity loss:

- Confusion about your purpose in the world;
- Feeling like you don't know what you want out of life;
- Disconnection from yourself, others, and the world around you;
- Feelings of being lost, alone, anxious or depressed;
- Having difficulty focusing or making decisions;
- Changes in your interests, social patterns, or appearance;
- A feeling of heaviness, like you're living in a fog; and
- Physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, and stomach ailments.



We'll talk about coping strategies and actions we can take to work with identity loss, but this is a good time for a disclaimer. I want to remind you that I'm a wellness coach and a teacher, not a mental health practitioner. If any of the symptoms that I just mentioned feel very intense for you, please, seek the help of a doctor or a therapist.

The type of identity loss we're discussing today is a bit more common. It's a natural reaction to change and it's a sign that you're growing and evolving. With time, support and some action, you'll be able to reclaim your identity and create a new life for yourself.

[00:03:59] So let's talk about a particular kind of identity shift. Career identity loss occurs as a result of leaving a long-term career, which can be a difficult and emotional process.

The symptoms will vary depending on the circumstances. If you didn't have control of the decision to separate, that is, if you were laid-off or terminated or downsized, you may be feeling lost, isolated, angry, disconnected, anxious, stressed, depressed, and maybe even engage in self-destructive behaviors.

If you made the decision to leave your career, either through retirement or the decision to change careers or start your own business, you may be feeling a lot of fear. Or you may be obsessively questioning whether you've done the right thing.

However the separation came about, there can be overall feelings of loss, confusion and uncertainty about who you are in your new reality. Things also get



very real very fast, especially if there's been a lack of planning around things such as financial planning, health insurance, social support, and maintaining a healthy support network to assist you in finding your new job or launching your new project.

Our work is often a major part of our identity. It's how we define ourselves, how we make a living, and how we contribute to society. When we leave a longtime career, we're not only losing a job, but we're also losing a part of ourselves.

There are a number of factors that can contribute to career identity loss, including the nature of corporate work, which can be very demanding and all-consuming. It can take up a lot of time and energy, and it can be difficult to maintain a sense of self outside of work.

The corporate culture can also contribute to career identity loss. In many companies, there's a strong emphasis on conformity and fitting in. And this can make it difficult for people to be themselves and express their individuality once they separate.

[00:06:27] If you're experiencing career identity loss, an important step that can get overlooked is allowing yourself to grieve the loss of your career. We've all experienced different levels of grief in our lives. And for me, the thought of grief didn't even enter my mind when I walked out the door of my employer for the last time. It was my choice. I was publishing a book and I had a plan. So I dove right into the busyness of my choosing.



I was very aware of the fear I felt in leaving a “sure thing,” but it took me a long time to realize that there was some sadness around leaving the camaraderie of my colleagues, the joy of work, the status of the role, the perks of the job, and the challenges of ongoing learning and reinvention to stay current.

A big part of why I didn't recognize it as grief is I left corporate just before the COVID outbreak. And so we were all thrown into a new reality that included a lot of grief, so I attributed how I felt to what was happening externally.

But I've come to learn that grief is a normal reaction when you leave a long-time career, because you're losing a part of yourself. And you may experience any or all of the stages of grief, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And there can be a whole host of feelings ranging from sadness to fear to hopelessness.

It's important to acknowledge and process these feelings. There's no right or wrong way to grieve and it takes time to adjust. What matters is that you're kind to yourself and you allow yourself to feel what you're feeling and ask for help if you're struggling.

The best way through this type of grief is finding new ways to define yourself beyond your career. There are many other things that make you who you are, such as your values, your relationships, and your interests. The usual advice is to take some time and think about what's important to you and what you're passionate about. That makes intellectual sense, but how do we really put it into practice and take action?



[00:08:57] Here's a summarizing roadmap of actions to consider:

1. **Acknowledge your feelings.** It's important to allow yourself to feel whatever emotions come up for you at this time. Don't try to bottle them up or pretend that you're not feeling anything.
2. **Talk to someone you trust.** Talking to a friend, family member, therapist, coach or other trusted person can help you process your feelings and make sense of what's happening. A support group can also help you feel less alone.
3. **Do something that makes you feel good.** Self-care is critical at this time, and you may need to push yourself to do it. But it's a worthy investment of your time and can include things like eating healthy foods, getting enough sleep, moving your body, meditating, journaling, doing something you enjoy, reading, listening or playing music, spending time in nature and with loved ones.
4. **Find new ways to connect with others.** Leaving a long-term career can be isolating. Make an effort to stay connected with friends, family and other social groups. You can take up a new hobby, a new sport or an activity, which will help you learn new things, stay active, have fun, and express yourself. You can also volunteer, which is a great way to stay engaged and connected to others. Volunteering can also help you find new meaning and purpose in your life.
5. **When you feel ready, set goals for the future.** It can be helpful to start thinking about what you want your life to look like after this transition is



completed. What are your aspirations? What would you like to achieve? Having something to look forward to can help you stay motivated.

6. **Give yourself the gift of time and reflection.** It takes time to grieve the loss of a long-term career. Write about your experiences. Be patient with yourself and give yourself time to heal and adjust to your new reality.

[00:11:21] Overall, identity loss in times of transition can be a difficult experience, but it's also an opportunity for a new beginning. Not only can you recover, but you can thrive in its wake. With time, support and self care, you can rebuild your sense of self, reclaim your identity, and find a new sense of purpose and a new life path for yourself.

I'll leave you today with the words of Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw, who said, "Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself."

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[00:12:05] Kathy: Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.



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Until next time, be well!

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[00:13:07] [END OF AUDIO]