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Dan*, a partner at a major Boston law firm, was due at the office, but instead, he was curled on his bathroom floor, unshaven and in his pajamas, crying into a towel.

It began slowly, in a meeting with a particularly pushy client, when a thought bubbled up in his mind: “Why the hell am I even here?” From that moment, he noticed that his impatience,

unhappiness, and frustration with his job grew deeper, until all at once, he realized: he didn't find happiness or fulfillment in his work — and maybe he never had.

For someone who had built his entire idea of himself around his career, this thought sent Dan into an existential crisis. Who was he, if not a high-powered lawyer? Had he wasted so many years working for nothing? Would he have had more friends and a happier family if he hadn't spent all those nights at the office?

Dan's story is not uncommon. Many people with high-pressure jobs find themselves unhappy with their careers, despite working hard their whole lives to get to their current position. Hating your job is one thing — but what happens if you identify so closely with your work that hating your job means hating yourself?

Psychologists use the term “enmeshment” to describe a situation where the boundaries between people become blurred, and individual identities lose importance. Enmeshment prevents the development of a stable, independent sense of self. Dan — like many in high-pressure jobs — had become enmeshed not with another person, but with his career.

As a psychologist, I specialize in mental health challenges associated with high-pressure careers. People like Dan show up in my office every day — so often, in fact, I had to build a company, Azimuth Psychological, to focus on serving their needs. A particular confluence of high achievement, intense competitiveness, and culture of overwork has caught many in a perfect storm of career enmeshment and burnout. Over the years, we've found that these issues interact in such complex ways with people's identity, personality, and emotions that it often requires full-on psychological therapy to address them successfully.

So, what is it about high-pressure careers that too often leads to mental health issues like those Dan faced?

The work culture in many high-pressure fields often rewards working longer hours with raises, prestige, and promotions. Dan found that spending more and more time in the office (or tethered to his corporate iPhone) was the price he had to pay for his rapid rise through the firm. However, when you engage in any intense activity for the great majority of your waking hours, that activity will tend to become more and more central to your identity — if only because it has displaced other activities and relationships with which you might identify.

Certain careers or career achievements are often highly valued in an individual's family or community. Dan's parents had both been lawyers, and while they never explicitly pushed Dan into a legal career, they had high expectations for his professional and financial achievements. When career success is seen as the ultimate life goal, individuals can feel disconnected from their family and peers if they fail to (or simply choose not to) achieve a certain level of professional success. This fear of failure and isolation drives people to center their lives on achieving what is expected of them. This

intense focus and drive, however, forces their identities to ultimately become synonymous with their work.

When high pressure jobs are paired with a big paycheck, individuals can find themselves launched into a new socioeconomic class. It's wasn't just the homes, cars, vacations, and gadgets that Dan suddenly couldn't live without — it was the friends, the dinner parties, the charity galas. Our identities are highly influenced by how we present ourselves to others. When someone forms an identity focused around wealth, achievement, and influence, they tie themselves to that high-paying career that got them there.

Even for those who don't burn out, constructing one's identity closely around a career is a risky move. Companies and entire industries struggle and go under. Age discrimination can make it especially difficult for those in the mid to late stages of their career to find a suitable role in their field after a layoff. No matter how it happens, becoming disconnected from a career that forms the foundation of your identity can lead to bigger issues, such as depression, anxiety, substance use, and loneliness.

So how do you know if your identity has become enmeshed with your career? Consider the following questions:

1. How much do you think about your job outside of the office? Is your mind frequently consumed with work-related thoughts? Is it difficult to participate in conversations with others that are not about your work?
2. How do you describe yourself? How much of this description is tied up in your job, title, or company? Are there any other ways you would describe yourself? How quickly do you tell people you've just met about your job?
3. Where do you spend most of your time? Has anyone ever complained to you that you are in the office too much?
4. Do you have hobbies outside of work that do not directly involve your work-related skills and abilities? Are you able to consistently spend your time exercising other parts of your brain?
5. How would you feel if you could no longer continue in your profession? How distressing would this be to you?

If these questions cause you to worry about the degree to which your job has influenced your identity, there are things you can do to initiate change. You can accomplish these on your own, or with the help of a therapist who understands the challenges faced by individuals in high-pressure careers.

Free up time. Delegate tasks at work to free up time, and (crucially) fill that time with non-work related activities. This could mean relying more heavily on your coworkers, hiring a virtual assistant, or advocating for an intern or additional colleague to help with tasks. Effective delegation requires

giving up some control of exactly how the work is to be executed, which in itself is a healthy exercise in communication and acceptance.

Start small. For your new activities outside of work, start small and try out some hobbies you’ve had your eye on. You don’t have to commit to anything long term; the idea is to start exploring new things you might want to integrate into your life and your identity. For example, if you want to exercise more, don’t sign up for a marathon — just start walking to work or taking a gym break during lunch once or twice a week. Small changes like this are easier to stick with, and over time can result in a virtuous cycle of improvement and commitment.

Rebuild your network. Reach out to friends and family to revitalize your social circles. You’ll end up having fun while also establishing a support network for yourself. Even just reaching out by text, email, or phone to catch up with people you haven’t spoken to in a while can help strengthen relationships. It doesn’t take much; [recent research](#) on adult friendships has shown that having just three to five close friends is associated with the highest levels of life satisfaction.

Decide what’s important to you. Establish and review your principles and values. What is most important to you? Think about what you care about in life, and let those priorities guide you toward what’s next. Therapists often use a process called “Values Clarification” to help their clients think through what matters most to them. This process involves reflecting on your desired direction in areas like relationships, community, careers, and parenting, then ranking them in terms of importance to you. While [formal worksheets](#) can be helpful, you can start by creating and updating a running list on your phone as you think about what is most important to you.

Look beyond your job title. Consider reframing your relationship to your career not simply in terms of your company or title, but in terms of your skills that could be used across different contexts. For example, many psychotherapists who burn out on seeing clients find that their skills translate well to human resources management or guidance counseling.

While identifying closely with your career isn’t necessarily bad, it makes you vulnerable to a painful identity crisis if you burn out, get laid off, or retire. Individuals in these situations frequently suffer anxiety, depression, and despair. By claiming back some time for yourself and diversifying your activities and relationships, you can build a more balanced and robust identity in line with your values.

**Name changed to protect identity*

Janna Koretz, Psy.D, is a psychologist and the founder of [Azimuth](#), which provides therapy focused on the unique challenges of individuals in high-pressure careers.
