



# “You’re fired!”

**YOU’VE JUST BEEN EJECTED FROM YOUR JOB. WHAT NOW? FIRST YOU MOURN, THEN YOU GET OVER IT. SURVIVAL TIPS FOR DUSTING YOURSELF OFF AND GETTING BACK ON YOUR FEET**

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etting fired from back-to-back jobs was almost as bad for my reputation as having back-to-back high school boyfriends named Dave who became born-again Christians.

“At least he didn’t leave me for another woman,” I’d quip, shrugging off the confusion and heart-break of first loves gone weird.

A few years ago, the first Dave called me out of the blue and dropped by for tea. He was still tall, dark and handsome, but the mullet was gone. He beamed as he showed me pictures of his family. The second Dave, a pastor at a California Baptist church, looked me up and sent me an email asking whether I had let “the Lord Jesus Christ into [my] life.” He sent a link to his church’s website, where Pastor Dave looked pretty much the same as he had in 1980 — right down to the smug look of self-righteousness he wore the day he told me he didn’t believe in premarital sex (anymore).

A couple of decades later, despite having a better haircut and more expensive shoes, I was ditched again, this time by successive bosses. I know premarital sex didn’t have anything to do with it, but I think the Lord may have had a role in firing number two. That boss once lectured me for using “Xmas” in an email: “Never take the

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Christ out of Christmas," he scolded.

The serial terminations were much harder than the consecutive Dave rejections. First, my comeback wasn't as good: "He needed a different kind of employee and I needed a different kind of boss" just wasn't as much fun to toss off as the "other woman" line.

Frankly, I had no idea why the Daves became born-again, but I honestly didn't think it had much to do with me. It took me a long time to realize that getting fired didn't have much to do with me either. At first, I was furious with the bosses who'd axed me. I felt rejected and tossed out like yesterday's tuna. I was terrified I wouldn't find another job because I'd been fired. And I was confused about how I'd gone from a rock star at work to rock bottom.

Esther Murphy\*, 51, faced the same confusion the day she was abruptly awakened from her dream job at a not-for-profit. Told she no longer fit, she was asked to pack up and get out. Now. Please.

Elizabeth Craig's\* Spidey sense had been on overdrive; she knew it was coming. The 42-year-old was superhero cool when she was asked to resign as senior manager at a communications company.

In each case, we packed up decades of experience and headed to our respective homes in Calgary and did what came naturally: bawled.

"I sobbed for three or four days, until the tears were gone," says Craig. "I cried on my friends' shoulders and I just got it out of my system. Then it was: Okay, so what's next?"

Murphy admits she was a wailing wreck too, until a friend helped her realize her boss was right: She hadn't been a good fit. "I didn't cry anymore after that," Murphy says. "But I did paint every room in my house — yellow,

The first time I got axed and sat blubbering on the couch, someone told me "tragedy plus time equals comedy." Thank goodness they were right.



blue, green, bright blue. Then I painted my garage. After that I had no more surfaces to paint, so I started playing tennis constantly."

In my case, I tried watching soaps and eating chips. But the plot hadn't changed since the last time I watched in 1993, so I packed up my not-so-young but very restless self and went to the gym. All three of us did what we had to do, to learn to cope. Here's what else we learned from being fired after 40.

**KEEP THE GORY DETAILS** of your termination to close friends and loving pets. Tell everyone else: "There was a restructuring," "I was given a package" or "It was time to move on." There's also the tried and true: "I was hired to do XYZ and over time the role changed." Find yourself a comfortable little black dress of a message — flattering but not too revealing.

Do not slag the boss or the company. Do not tell lies. Do use the opportunity to sell yourself a bit, says career guru Barbara Moses, author of *Dish: Midlife Women Tell the Truth About Work, Relationships and the Rest of Life*. If your boss was a micromanager control freak, you could simply say: "My boss does well with employees who require a lot of direction, and I do well with a boss who gives me the big picture and lets me execute."

"You need to pitch [the firing] very positively and realistically," says Marilyn Balfour, director of career resources at Bowen, a Calgary placement firm. "The less you can actually say about it the better, because the more you say, the deeper the hole you can dig for yourself." Coming across angry and bitter won't impress potential employers.

Talk to counsellors and friends for reassurance that you're not incompetent. They'll likely tell you great people, regardless of age, get fired all the time. "Oftentimes it's the people who are the brightest, most creative, most experienced and not afraid to speak their minds who lose their jobs, because they cross swords with someone," Balfour says. "It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Still, it hurts. A lot. As Moses puts it, "It feels like you've had the crap knocked out of you and you have to



take the time to assimilate what that means." By the time we're in our forties, we tend to be in a more senior position and it's terrifying to lose that. "A lot of women who lose their jobs can't afford to," Balfour says. "There's fear and bitterness and resentment and a loss of self-esteem, because for a lot of women much of their self-esteem comes from the workplace. When that's taken away, it's huge."

Elizabeth Craig was calm and collected the day she was fired, but a few weeks later, as she drove to an appointment, she realized her self-esteem had disappeared along with her paycheck. "I was having this lovely conversation with myself: Who the hell did I think I was? I'm not smart enough, I'm lazy. I'm not strong enough. I'm a total loser," she recalls. "I was going down this rabbit hole."

Craig says it took about a year to fully recover. Esther Murphy is still working on it: She says it felt as if she'd been tossed off a high-speed train. "I had a destination and I was brutally thrown off and I didn't even know where I was. I'm over 50 years old. How could I have been so naive as to think it was such a great job for me?"

Getting your mojo back can be hard work, but it's more important than writing that bang-up resumé. You have to examine the entrails of getting fired: Own what you need to; learn what you have to about why you got fired; and get over the fear before you start looking for a new job. "You have a choice about whether you feel like the biggest loser in the world and you're never going to get a job again, or you can think, 'Okay, this happened to me and it wasn't that pleasant,'" Balfour says. She says, in her experience, 90 per cent of women over 40 are able to get past the negative thinking and recover from getting fired. How quickly that

happens, Balfour believes, has far more to do with their level of self-esteem than their age.

When you're considering next steps, recognize that what you want will likely have changed over the years. When you were 35 with young kids, you probably didn't want a job with a lot of travel, but 10 or 15 years later, that may be just the ticket.

Start networking, which means more than collecting business cards. You can make connections at your kid's hockey game just as easily as you can

at a power lunch. "Some people have a hard time selling themselves," says Moses. "They're afraid they're using people or being manipulative, but that's not true. You're giving them information about who you are and what you do."

And don't worry about your age. Moses says it's not like it used to be years ago, when women of a certain age would have to worry about ageism in the job market. Retirees are in high demand to help keep the economy going, so in most industries being over 40 doesn't hurt your chances of getting a new job.

After about a year of contract work, Craig found a great position in sales. "I have a job with way more balance than I've had in the last 20 years, with the same money and a much greater potential to make more." Three years after being fired, she reports: "There's nothing bad about this picture!"

Murphy is embarking on new professional adventures after her termination last summer. "I was looking for purpose when I found that job; now I have to find a new purpose, and that's actually really exciting," she says.

Both Balfour and Moses warn people not to do what I did after my first firing, which is take the first job that comes along (unless it is absolutely the perfect job). Always impatient and definitely afraid, I jumped at it. And got fired again. But this time, I decided I was altogether fed up with bosses; I'd try my luck without them and become a communications consultant. The first time I got fired and sat blubbing on the couch, someone told me "tragedy plus time equals comedy." The second time, I remember smiling as I walked out of the boss's office. It was April Fool's Day — before noon — and he didn't get the joke. **M**

*\*Names changed by request*

## HOW TO SURVIVE A TERMINATION

- Express your emotions only in a safe place with safe people.
- Develop a message about why you left: something generic, professional and not untrue, such as "It was time to move on."
- Call an employment lawyer to make sure you negotiate the best severance package, including outplacement services and a letter of reference.
- Do not slag your boss or the company to anyone outside trusted, close friends.
- Talk to counsellors, friends and others to get advice, support and perspective.
- Choose to be positive about your future.
- Assess your skills, likes and dislikes, and figure out what you want to do next.
- Make real connections with people when networking.
- Wait until the right job comes along: Do not jump from the frying pan into the fire.