Sunshine outside the ivory tower

Over the past few years, all three of us have left academia. It was the right decision for each of us, but we still struggled with uncertainty and a feeling of failure, and we could find little community support. We thought that sharing our experiences could help others in similar situations, so we created the Recovering Academic podcast. The specifics of our postacademic careers vary, but for us and many of our listeners, the emotional challenges have been similar.

AMANDA: I first thought about leaving academia about a year after receiving my Ph.D., but I ended up staying. A few years later, I again started to seriously consider leaving. To test the waters, I got a part-time position as an editorial manager for a science website while continuing with my postdoc. I found that I enjoyed working as an editor more than my research. I still hesitated about leaving, though, because the decision felt so final. I talked with everyone about what I should do. I had multiple Twitter conversations and an hourlong phone call with Cleyde, who had already made her break. I asked her no less than five times whether she regretted it. Her answer was always “no.”

When I finally left, I was confident that it was the right choice, but I felt I had lost my tribe. Suddenly, the Twitter conversations about syllabi and common lab struggles didn’t concern me. I was lost. I wanted to create a community of people who had either left academia or decided to be in academia on their own terms.

CLEYDE: When I started my postdoc, I was full of dreams and expectations. I wanted to become a principal investigator. Years later, as the lab I was working in lost its funding and closed, I faced the painful realization that I was not only without a job, but also without a dream. I didn’t want to quit research, but I had had enough of the stress of academia. At the same time, I worried that maybe I was considering leaving because I felt I wasn’t good enough to succeed. But I didn’t have time for crisis—I needed a job.

After a few months, I got one in biotech sales. I’m an extrovert, and talking on the phone and visiting professors was a good fit. But I noticed that I was avoiding visiting my former university. No matter how happy I was, I felt uncomfortable about showing up as a salesperson. A sense of failure is common among “recovering academics,” and it is hard to overcome. So, when Amanda approached me about starting a podcast to support others leaving academia, I thought it was a great idea.

IAN: During my postdoc, I applied to jobs, casting about for a direction that felt right. I was depressed and wrote about it online. That led me to take a writing course and create a science blog. When my postdoc ended, I felt done with academia and wanted to get into science writing or editing. After several months underemployed and freelancing, I found a job through social media. Support from the online academic community motivated me to help scientists thrive, not merely survive.

When Amanda pitched Recovering Academic, I saw it as a chance to speak about my transition as it happened, including both the lows and the highs of starting a new job beyond academia. Any career path brings uncertainties. To ease the transition, recovering academics need to realize that we have well-trained minds, and that what is often missing is simply knowing how to talk about our skills and how we might apply them to a new career direction.

OUR PODCAST HAS FAR EXCEEDED our expectations. Not only has it been well received, with more than 12,000 downloads in our first season, but it has also helped each of us cope with our own feelings about leaving academia. As we start the second season, we hope that we can help others cope with the ups and downs of their postacademic careers and find their own community.

Amanda Welch is a freelance scientific editor. Cleyde Helena is a biotech sales representative. Ian Street is a virtual lab manager, science writer, and editor. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

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