

We Turn Helpless People Into Losers

To survive and thrive in today's society we need to have nothing go wrong with our lives. This article explains how we can prevent major life changes from destroying lives. Find the home site of author Bill Allin at <http://billallin.com>

Don't simply retire from something; have something to retire to.

- Harry Emerson Fosdick, American clergyman (1878-1969)

While this advice holds great importance to those about to retire or who will retire within the next 20 years, it also has great importance on a broader scale.

In the middle decades of the past century, when retirement with some sort of pension at age 65 became common, working people looked forward for decades (in some cases) to the days when they could go on permanent vacation. Retirement as long term vacation was such a goal that it prompted many entrepreneurs to devise ways to siphon money from those with lots of time and not enough to do.

Only a few decades of that retirement-as-vacation thinking passed before the younger generations began to realize that something was wrong. Retirees who kicked back and relaxed, read the newspaper and dabbled around the backyard pool didn't last long.

In fact, many became television addicts, the most devoted of viewers of game shows and soap operas. These allowed their minds to atrophy along with their bodies.

One study just a few years ago showed that those who subscribed to the retirement-as-permanent-vacation line of thinking lived an average of six years past their 65th birthday.

Today society encourages retired people to get active, get moving, get involved and get thinking in many ways. As a consequence, the average lifespan in most western countries is now at or above 80 years, about a decade longer than those who subscribed to the permanent vacation thinking.

Those about to retire are now encouraged to consider the years they spend away from their primary source of income before age 65 to make their next few decades into a "second life," whether that be to start a new business, do volunteer work, participate in a mentoring program or to get involved with helping still older people or others with physical problems that prevent them from getting around and involved with the possibilities of life.

We see retirement now as a major change of life and lifestyle. That requires preparation and planning.

We tend to give less attention to those who must make other major life changes earlier. When a business or industry closes, putting many people out of work, only then do we scramble around to provide the newly unemployed with training to get new jobs. Many people who get fired or laid off have no idea what to do with themselves. Their lives and those of their families suffer as a result.

Only after people experience divorce or death of a spouse do we try to provide some guidance as to how to cope with their loss and how to "begin again." And only then for the fortunate ones who happen to have associations with organizations that offer such services.

For people who experience emotional collapse, very little exists other than basic medical help. In a fast-paced high-stress society, emotional collapse should rank much higher on our radar as a possibility. We could help to prepare people to cope with the stressors of their lives ahead of time, but mostly we just hope that they will survive and get their lives straightened around on their own.

Divorce and job loss have become so common that we should prepare people to cope with the changes when they happen. The emotional shock would be much less severe if people knew that it would happen and what to do when it does. (Preparing them to avoid the need for divorce in the first place is another issue entirely.)

What in the 1970s and 1980s was called the male mid-life crisis has not lessened, but it has almost fallen off our social radar. Many people have enough life and work experience by the middle years of their working lives that

they would dearly love to do something different. Often this involves starting their own business, working for themselves.

Not only would this open up more jobs for employment to younger people, it would also fill many voids in our business spectrum now, positions that would never be filled by industries or larger businesses.

First we need to teach young adults that they will likely find themselves out of a job some day and that they will need to know what to do when that happens. Then we need to provide them with the possible tools and training so that they will be able to make the transition as smoothly as possible. That's the kind of preparation that the quote suggests.

People who desperately want to leave their mates need training as well. Many will not leave because they fear being alone in the world with no support and few possibilities. Some suffer abuse because they don't know how to build new lives for themselves on their own.

As Fosdick said--or as I would add as a corollary--these people need to know what they can move to, not just what they want to run away from. By not making people aware of the possibilities (and providing shelters where the abused can go for immediate support), we make the lives of many people worse by leaving them to fend for themselves. Most simply don't know what to do or where to turn.

The first step in their conversion to a new way of thinking about the lives of our people is to teach them that events such as death of a loved one, job loss and divorce will very likely happen to them at some point in their lives. When enough people know this, others will organize tools and training sessions by which everyone will eventually know how to cope with sudden unplanned changes in life.

If we're going to live longer, we will experience major life changes more often than our ancestors. It's time to grow up as societies and offer what our people need so that everyone knows how to cope with problems without turning to harmful alternatives such as drugs, addictions such as gambling, or abuse of loved ones.

Bill Allin

Turning It Around: Causes and Cures for Today's Epidemic Social Problems, a hands-on manual for parents and teachers to show what kids need, when they need it and why meeting those needs must not be an option as it is today.

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Author: builder

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