

Life after work

DEBRA BERNACKI SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Tanya Nemiroff has finally settled in to retirement. The former social

worker retired three years ago at the age of 67, after spending 37 years of her life in the workplace.

She worked the last 22 years at the Jewish General Hospital in the Psychogeriatric Out Patient Unit.

"Many were Holocaust survivors," said Nemiroff. "I did a lot of family work, counselling and helping families cope with changes in their elderly parents."

She supervised other social workers in the latter part of her career.

"Life after work initially, was not a piece of cake," said Nemiroff. "I was ready to retire because I was work tired, but I wasn't prepared."

She was not prepared for the psychological and social impact the change would have on her life.

"The focus is always on the financial planning aspects of retirement - your RRSPs and money - but no one talks about the emotional component and the not-so-glowing issues," she said.

All the hours a month Nemiroff had dedicated to her patients, her work and her colleagues were now free, but empty.

"It was a loss, and no one can deny it. Retirement for many people is very liberating, but it comes with wrinkles. You lose your work identity and you ask yourself: 'Who am I after my work?'"

"You also have to replace the affirmation you got from the work you did, with something else."

Gillian Leithman, a certified retirement coach says many employees have difficulty adjusting to their retirement and navigating their way through the countless hours that are no longer taken up by their job.

"They struggle with the existential crisis of who am I apart from my work role, where am I going to find meaning and purpose and what am I waking up to in the morning."

RETIREMENT can leave many workers with a feeling of loss. Often, they find themselves asking: Who am I after my work? Developing a leisure repertoire is key to a successful transition

Leithman said lifestyle planning is crucial.

"In order to prepare for retirement, people need to develop a leisure repertoire - their own personal library of activities that are both meaningful and enjoyable and that they can participate in on a regular basis. They need to do that before they retire."

"The average age of retirement is 62 and about 40 per cent of those people struggle and have a tumultuous time with that new stage in their lives," Leithman said.

"The more advanced people are in their company's hierarchy and the more prestige they hold in their positions, the harder it is for them to give up their roles and the more traumatic the change can be."

"I wish I would have been more prepared," said Nemiroff. "At first, I almost felt like I was playing hooky, like I was cheating. I would do all kinds of things, like run out and do shopping in the middle of the day or read a book first thing in the morning and not get out of bed for half a day, just lull

around. It was pretty exciting for a while."

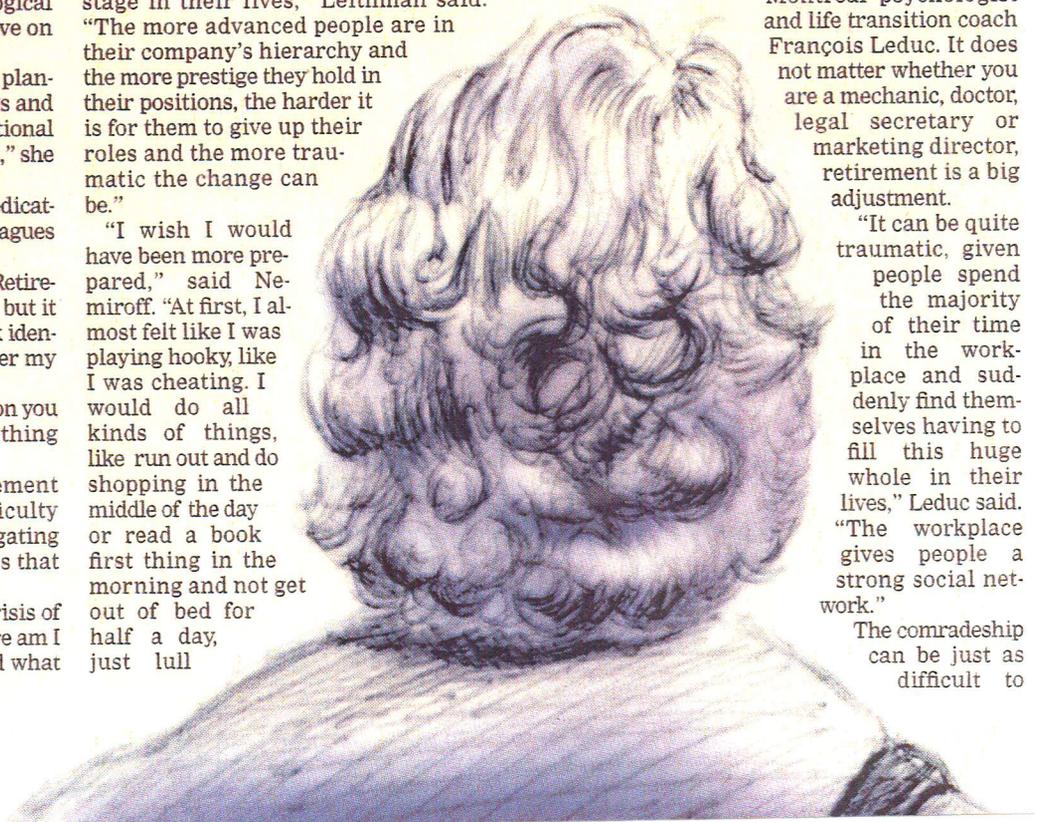
After the novelty wore off and reality hit, feelings of sadness surfaced and Nemiroff found herself struggling to find new ways to re-channel her energy into more meaningful activities.

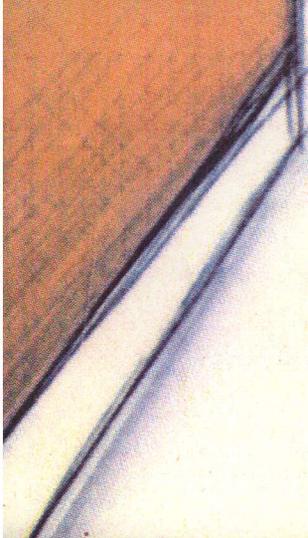
"I realized I had to do more than just sit around eating bonbons."

Nemiroff's bumpy transition from the working world into the unknown world of retirement is typical, says Montreal psychologist and life transition coach François Leduc. It does not matter whether you are a mechanic, doctor, legal secretary or marketing director, retirement is a big adjustment.

"It can be quite traumatic, given people spend the majority of their time in the workplace and suddenly find themselves having to fill this huge whole in their lives," Leduc said. "The workplace gives people a strong social network."

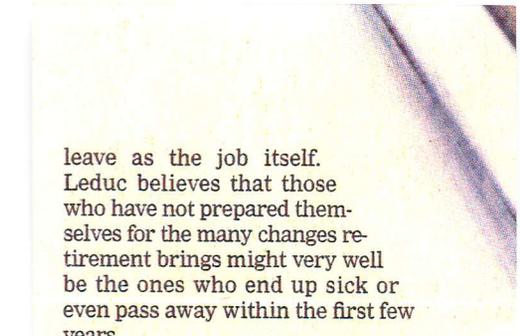
The comradeship can be just as difficult to





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leave as the job itself. Leduc believes that those who have not prepared themselves for the many changes retirement brings might very well be the ones who end up sick or even pass away within the first few years.

Stages of retirement: There are usually three stages of retirement:

The honeymoon phase: This might last days, weeks or months. You feel like you're on an extended vacation.

The transition phase: It's when you realize you are not going back to work, that part of your life has ended. You begin to question your identity and purpose. Feelings of loss and sadness are common. You search for meaning and direction.

The acceptance phase: You have developed a new daily structure, routine, interests and lifestyle. You are content within yourself and satisfied with the new chapter in your life.

It took Nemiroff about a year to work her way through the maze of emotions and reach the stage of acceptance.

"I realized I had been so programmed and so focused on work that I had to figure out how to adjust to a new pace, establish new relationships and develop new interests," she said.

Nemiroff is now embracing her retirement rhythm: After living many years with an untuned piano in her home, she finally had it tuned and has returned to her love of music. Her treadmill is getting used and she visits with her children and grandchildren more often. Old relationships have been rekindled and she's reconnecting with her newly retired husband.

Life after work can be a time of discovery rather than regret. It is an opportunity to explore and develop new interests, get back to old hobbies, take courses and even get involved in the community. Establishing a new routine and structuring your day will help you transition from employee to retiree.