

Covid made millions quit their jobs. Many probably should've stayed put a little longer.

The "Great Resignation" was fueled partly by a desire to find happiness and work-life balance, but abruptly quitting a good job solely out of desperation can lead to problems you don't see coming.



— Abruptly quitting a good job solely out of frustration can lead to problems you don't see coming.
Elise Wrabetz / NBC News; Getty Images

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By Ashley Memory

When I read that the Labor Department reported that a record **4.5 million people** resigned from their jobs in November, I immediately thought back to my early retirement in 2017 at age 49. Many different factors lead someone to choose to quit a job, but during what has come to be known as the "Great

Resignation,” the eagerness to find happiness, purpose, better health and work-life balance seems to be at the top of the list.

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Desperate to escape a demanding position that aggravated my chronic illness, I fled the workplace for the same reason. After the initial feeling of euphoria, reality hit in a way that made me realize that abruptly quitting a good job solely out of frustration can lead to problems you don't see coming.

“Are you going to be OK?” asked my boss of 12 years as I packed the last of my possessions — my framed college diploma, a clay paperweight my son made as a child and a silly pen with a polyester flower given to me by co-workers — into a box. I'm not sure, but he may have been referring to my finances and perhaps my emotional well-being. But on that day, I was nothing short of giddy, and I wasn't looking back.

“Oh, yes,” I said, as I hastily hugged him and the circle of well-wishers standing around after my farewell party.

“Let's get out of here,” I whispered to my fiancé, J.P., who had already pulled the “getaway” car into the traffic circle outside my building. Once we were inside the vehicle, we whirled out of the parking lot, and I rolled down the window and shouted “Hallelujah!” for all the world to hear. I couldn't wait to start my new life — a sentiment that I'm sure many of the millions of people who've recently resigned have felt.

It was May 2017, and to be retiring before 50 with a small pension and full health insurance felt as if I were stealing fire from the gods. After my long-term battle with multiple sclerosis, the constant deadlines of all jobs in a nearly 25-year marketing and communications career had nearly wrecked my health and life.

In my most recent role as a senior admissions counselor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, I felt as if I were responsible for the lives of the 40,000 young people who applied for admission each year, because I handled the daily mass communication with every one of them. The unrelenting demands — working through lunch and often on weekends — worsened my fatigue and the weakness in my legs. The straw that finally broke this weary camel's back was my boss's directive that I revise and

reprint 11,000 brochures to accommodate a lastminute change that I believed we had already agreed not to do.

The first few weeks of post-retirement life were heavenly. Sleeping past 8 a.m. was an indulgence I rarely permitted before. I would have time, I believed, to take better care of myself with leisurely breakfasts and relaxation. I could also plan a wedding to J.P., who had stood by me through a difficult divorce and consoled me with sonnets he wrote himself.

We exchanged vows shortly afterward in a small ceremony on the deck of our unfinished house. J.P. was a retired artist who also lived on a budget, and we decided to do much of the final work ourselves to save money. This became my new life, following him around with a tape measure and a broom as he framed doors and installed secondhand appliances we bought together. But with my lack of construction know-how, I soon got in the way, so I read and reread my favorite books, planted a garden, made raspberry jam and taught myself to sew curtains.

I relished the quiet life at first, but loneliness and boredom eventually settled in after so many years of daily interaction with others. To fill my hours and to feel productive, I rashly volunteered to lead the missions committee at my church, a role that would coordinate the work of five subcommittees, a new and much-needed position. As another first, I decided to design and produce our first-ever newsletter. And when one of the women in our community needed emergency after-school care for her daughters while she completed a nursing degree, I filled that gap, as well, even as it required frequent last-minute accommodations for her schedule.

As I juggled all of these new activities, I learned that I had underestimated the scope of my “full” health insurance. Less than one year after my retirement, I found myself owing money for the out-of-pocket remainders of both my colonoscopy and the updated MRIs required by my neurologist for the monthly infusions of a drug that helped minimize exacerbations of my multiple sclerosis.

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Now I panicked. To pay my bills without reaching into my emergency savings, I applied for teaching gigs at a community college and a nonprofit literary organization. This led to several freelance editing

assignments that covered my medical expenses when combined with my teaching. However, I was now surrounded by competing deadlines from every direction — my church committee, the children I cared for and now my new students and their work. Ironically, my husband installed a beautiful thrift store bathtub about this time, but I was too busy to spare any time for a luxurious soak, only quick showers. Sadly, I had more “me time” in my previous job because it was just one position, not three.

“Don’t you miss working?” texted a friend from my old admissions job.

“Not at all,” I lied, too proud to admit that I never really stopped.

I also held back a larger truth, the sinking realization I had retired too early. If I had shared more about the stresses in my admissions job, I feel sure, my managers would have worked with me to reduce the load or make some other changes — especially since I learned that they had split my responsibilities between two people after I departed. I had worked there long enough to have the clout to at least ask. But I allowed my frustration over one trivial incident — reprinting those brochures — to cloud my better judgment. If only this professional communicator had, ahem, communicated more and toughed it out just two more years, I would have qualified for a bigger pension, more than enough to get by.

I made another mistake in taking on too much service work too soon. I had never really volunteered in my life, and I misjudged how many hours these responsibilities would take. I realize now that I should have taken it much slower and recognize that just because I led a committee doesn’t mean I was required to fulfill all the work myself.

The recent flock of those leaving their jobs may be escaping their workplaces for all sorts of reasons, but for those of you who are thinking of shoving your jobs, I advise you to think very carefully about what’s leading you to feel that way.

In my case, it was the very things I thought I hated: recurring deadlines and staff meetings. And, of course, the one thing I thought I could live without: a full-size paycheck. And just like me, once you retire or quit a job in search of another, it may take a little time to find a balance between staying engaged in life and taking care of yourself.

Although the pandemic brought an unwelcome wave of tragedy to our world, the necessity to withdraw from some public interactions allowed me to reassess priorities in my life and make needed adjustments. Teaching by Zoom means I can schedule assignments at my convenience, and because I no longer commute, I save time I used to spend traveling. I also began delegating more responsibilities to

my fellow church committee members, and when they offered to help me with the newsletter, I gratefully accepted.

“What is this?” asked J.P., who recently found me soaking in a sudsy bathtub leafing through a magazine. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in here.”

“Get used to it,” I told him, laughing. “This is the new me. I’m retired, remember?”

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