

Career Depression among University Graduates: Causes and Consequences

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The Phenomenon of Career Depression

We use the word career all time, but what does it really mean? It has different meanings. It can be viewed from the different perspectives. It is a job or profession that someone does for a long time. It is also used to refer to the series of jobs an individual has over his or her lifetime. It also means advancement. A career describes an individual's journey through learning, work and other aspect of life. A career is defined as the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time (Arthur et al., 2005; Arnold & Cohen, 2008). A career is typically undertaken as a permanent calling and is expected to produce progressive achievement over the course of one's life.

In fact, it is the aspiration for a successful career that motivates most human beings to pursue education. Yet, despite availing of tertiary level education from universities and securing jobs upon graduation, many graduates develop disillusionment and dissatisfaction surrounding their careers. In some cases, lack of contentment takes a more severe form known as career depression.

Depression is one of the most common mental ailments among adults (Richards, 2011). It is a disorder that affects the mental health of individuals and their behavior and is associated with prolonged feelings of sadness, passivity, and disinterest in activities that were previously found enjoyable (WHO, n.d.). Beck (1972) conceptualizes depression as a "cognitive triad", whereby an individual operates under a set of distorted schemata pertaining to the self, the world, and the future. Where such a negative mental state can be traced to one's job or career, he/she is said to

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be suffering from career depression. While some authors have suggested that there exists an inextricable link between career problems and mental health concerns (Betz & Corning, 1993; Swanson, 2002), research on career depression remains relatively scarce. This may perhaps be attributed to its covert nature and the reluctance on the part of affected individuals to acknowledge their condition. Yet, career depression can become crippling and negatively affect not only the individual concerned, but also their families, the organizations that employ them, and society at large (Gadassi et al., 2015).

Causes of Career Depression

Lack of Person-Job Fit – Person job-fit refers to the congruence between individual knowledge, skills, abilities and job requirements (Zhou et al., 2011). Prior studies have shown that a lack of person-job fit hampers career satisfaction and engagement (Cai et al., 2018). Hence, it may be inferred that career depression often arises when the person-job fit is missing. In many developing countries, including Bangladesh, students graduate from universities, only to find that jobs which match their education or specialization are not available (Ara and Khan, 2019). These graduates then have to adapt to roles that do not fully utilize their academic learning. This is often the starting point of disillusionment with the job. Even if jobs and qualifications are in sync, most professions today require a vast array of soft skills, such as interpersonal skills, communication skills, and leadership skills, among others. Unfortunately, many tertiary level institutes do not adequately prepare their graduates in these areas. This amplifies the lack of person-job fit and curtails career progress. The result is low self-esteem and eventual depression.

Family Expectations– In certain situations, the family may be a major force in shaping one's career choice. However, where such a choice conflicts with one's preferred vocational choice, disillusionment and depression can result. For instance, in a study of Jordanian nurses, Yousef et al. (2017) found that individuals who opted for the nursing profession under family pressure were considerably more likely to be depressed than those who chose the profession on their own. Individuals forced by family into a profession were even more likely to be depressed than individuals who felt forced into a career due to a lack of other options in the job market (Yousef et al., 2017). The problem may be particularly acute in countries with collectivist cultures where freshly graduated individuals

find themselves caught in a tug of war between a perceived sense of duty towards fulfilling their family's expectation and a longing for their preferred career path – thus making family pressure a key antecedent of career depression.

Career Indecision and Low Vocational Identity– Career indecision has been identified by authors as one of the strongest predictors of career depression among young adults (Walker & Peterson, 2012). In a study of college students, Rottinghaus et al. (2009), for instance, found that individuals who were certain about what career they wished to pursue had far fewer depressive symptoms than individuals who had limited clarity on their career choice. In a related vein, Saunders et al. (2000) stress the danger of having a low vocational identity as this leads to career indecision and subsequently, depression. Vocational identity is defined as having a clear understanding of one's career aspirations, abilities, academic interests, and values (Koo & Kim, 2016). Where such identity is strong, Saunders et al. (2000) suggest that individuals are able to make the transition from academia to work life more easily and enjoy greater occupational satisfaction. However, where such identity is weak, the state of career indecision becomes acute and prolonged, acting as a major antecedent of negative affective states such as anxiety and depression.

Financial Pressure – The transition from academic life to work life has been noted as a difficult one for many young adults, since it requires the assumption of greater financial responsibility and the loss of any university stipends, accommodation facilities, etc., that could have served as safety nets. This is supported by research which indicates that emerging adulthood, which coincides with graduation from university and starting of a career is one of those life stages in which the incidence of depression is particularly high (Rhode et al., 2013). Financial pressure as an antecedent of career depression may be particularly prevalent in developing countries, where a large cross-section of university graduates come from humble socio-economic backgrounds (Ara and Khan, 2019). For such families, the cost of tertiary education is a major financial burden. Hence, it is a common expectation that upon graduation, an individual will secure a high-paying job that allows him/her to reciprocate the support received from the family. Such high paying jobs are scarce and out of reach for the vast majority of graduates. This causes many employed graduates to be dissatisfied with their compensation packages and hence, their careers.. When coupled with

family expectations, this creates acute financial pressure and propels them towards despair.

Perception of Inequity – The perception of having received unfair treatment at the workplace is often a major source of job dissatisfaction and subsequent career depression. Many managers hold antagonistic attitudes towards certain employees, and this makes the employees feel that their performance appraisal does not adequately reflect their contribution to the organization. In addition, some organizations have highly political work environments and individuals find their growth stunted unless they are able to engage in actions such as coalition-building, ingratiation, subservience to dominant in-groups, among others. Despite dissatisfaction with such toxic work environments, many individuals feel compelled to stay back in the fear that a better job may not be available. This creates an actual or perceived lack of control over one's own career, thus inducing depressive thoughts.

Lack of Intrinsic Satisfaction – Intrinsic satisfaction refers to the satisfaction that is derived from the characteristics of the job itself rather than from factors external to the job such as its rewards. Even when fortunate enough to find high-paying jobs, many individuals become dissatisfied due to lack of intrinsic motivation. One reason for this is the lack of task significance. This is a situation where one feels that the work he/she is doing is not meaningful and does not contribute to broader organizational and/or societal goals. Lack of autonomy on the job also reduces intrinsic satisfaction. This occurs because some organizations have highly centralized decision-making processes and do not permit employees to exercise judgment or creativity. In such situations, university graduates with high aspirations may fail to find pride and contentment in their job, leading to eventual depression.

Work-Life Conflict – Work-life conflict refers to the perplexing situation where individuals find themselves in a tug of war between their professional and personal lives. Young employees today are under intense work pressure, which often requires them to work beyond the stipulated 40-hours a week. Technological progress has also meant that employees are expected to be available “on demand”, such that no time of the day is truly free from work (Deloitte, 2020). Inability to resolve work-life conflict causes individuals to feel that they are not being able to do justice to the demands of their job or their family, leading to depression. It is

worth noting, that an increasing number of today's university graduates are millennials. Research shows that millennials may be predisposed to such depression, more than generations before them (Moody's Analytics, 2019). Hence, as more millennials enter the workforce, career depression resulting from work-life conflict may become more manifest.

Environmental Uncertainty – The growing incidence of mental disorders in the wake of COVID-19 demonstrates how factors in the external environment can contribute to career depression. While the pandemic has left many employed individuals feeling insecure and anxious about their career prospects, research suggests that university students and/or graduates who are contemplating joining the job market are the worst affected by such uncertainty (Mahmud et al., 2021). The state of anxiety may be manifested in an inability to make appropriate career choices and thus contribute to career depression both directly and indirectly. University graduates in developing countries such as Bangladesh, which have abundant supply of labor but limited employment opportunities, may be particularly susceptible to such depression. This is because pandemics such as COVID-19 and associated economic downturns further tilt the balance of power in favor of organizations, in what is already an employer's market.

Consequences of Career Depression

Consequences for the Individual–Career depression traps individuals in a vicious cycle from which it becomes very difficult to escape. This may be attributed to several reasons. First, when individuals are depressed, they start losing interest in their work, which hampers productivity and performance. Low productivity and performance, in turn, reduce self-efficacy, which is an individual's belief in his/her own ability to accomplish desired goals. Once self-efficacy is lowered, success may be hard to achieve. This creates a series of failures, which aggravates the depression (Maddux & Meier, 1995). Second, a depressed individual may have difficulty in engaging with others at the workplace, thus reducing interpersonal effectiveness.

Third, research shows that depressed individuals suffer from dysfunctional career thinking (Saunders et al., 2000; Walker & Peterson, 2012). According to Woo & Keatinge (2008), depressed individuals display impairment in cognitive functions, including the capacity to make rational decisions.

This is supported by Beck (1972) who suggests that the cognitive process through which depressed individuals process environmental stimuli is faulty, which in turn leads to suboptimal responses to such stimuli. Hence, a person suffering from career depression due to toxic work situations may find himself/herself incapable of accurately assessing the factors causing the depression and coming up with an appropriate response, such as looking for alternative employment. This has the potential to impair not just short-term career prospects, but also long-term success and life satisfaction (Gati et al., 2006).

Career depression also creates negative externalities for an individual's personal life. When work becomes a cause of bitterness rather than a source of gratification, individuals may distance themselves from their family and friends. They may also engage in meaningless conflict with the same, thus leading to unstable personal relationships (Ibrahim et al., 2013). This is a major problem because a supportive network of trusted ones is often key to helping depressed individuals. But if the depressed individual himself/herself shuns this network, the latter may have little means of helping, thus creating a self-perpetuating cycle of despair. At the very extreme, depression may also cause suicidal tendencies among affected individuals (Westefeld & Furr, 1987; Ibrahim et al., 2013).

Consequences for the Organization

Effective and efficient human resources are the key to building and maintaining competitive advantage in any organization. Depressed employees do not able to perform well as they cannot use their full potentials. As a result, the resources invested in recruiting, training, and developing these individuals may produce lower returns than originally predicted. This is supported by an abundance of research which links depression to work impairment (Kessler et al., 2001; Stewart et al., 2003; Gadassi et al., 2015). Depressed individuals are also likely to display higher absenteeism and lower organizational commitment (Donohue & Pincus, 2007). In this context, it may be noted that mental health problems, including depression, are the second leading cause of days lost owing to work-related illness in the UK (WHO, 2006). Likewise, in the United States, mental health problems cause more absenteeism than do physical illnesses, and depression is ranked as the third most important work-related problem (WHO, 2006).

The concept of emotional contagion may also be relevant in this context. Emotional contagion refers to a situation where the positive or negative emotions of one individual has a spillover effect on others in the workplace. Hence, to the extent that a depressed individual has a contagious effect on others, the entire organizational climate might suffer (Barsadeet al., 2018). The costs, in this case, will not be restricted to a single individual, but will be multiplied several times.

Consequences for Society–The youth represent the most productive population in an economy. Hence, any condition which hampers the productive capacity of the youth is detrimental to the nation, with career depression being no exception in this regard. While exact statistics related to career depression are rare, it is estimated that mental health issues can cost a staggering 3-4% of the GDP of developed countries (WHO, 2006). In the US, depression cost an estimated \$80 billion in the year 2000, and 62% of such depression emanated from workplace issues (Greenberg et al., 2003). In Bangladesh, the incidence of depression among people suffering from mental health conditions is 4.6% (Kar, 2013) making it one of the most prevalent psychological disorders in the country. Bangladesh is currently experiencing a once-in-a-lifetime demographic dividend, which presents opportunities for accelerated economic growth. However, such growth cannot be sustained if university graduates, who are supposed to spearhead innovation and efficiency, perform at sub-par levels owing to depression.

Prevention and Coping Mechanisms

The Role of the Individual -The first step towards overcoming career depression is to acknowledge that it truly exists and that it deserves special care, just like a physiological disorder does. The importance of this first step is even more salient in the case of developing countries such as Bangladesh where mental health issues do not receive due attention (Ara and Khan, 2019) owing to the associated social stigma.

Once the person has acknowledged his/her condition, it is necessary to proactively engage in career management, which may simply be defined as taking charge of one's own career (Greenhaus et al., 2009) through analysis, planning and action (Forsyth, 2002). People suffering from career depression tend to undermine their strengths and exaggerate their weaknesses. Such a tendency must be overcome to avoid getting

entrapped in the vicious cycle of low self-efficacy. Given the difficulty of conducting a proper self-assessment when one is depressed, feedback on strengths and weaknesses can be sought from trusted individuals including seniors at work, peers, or even family members. Based on this feedback, the individual can take initiatives to address areas of deficiency, while continuing to contribute to the organization through his/her strengths. Proactively seeking out training and skill-development opportunities, for instance, can be an effective way of overcoming weaknesses and thus minimizing the lack of person-job fit. Depressed individuals can also help themselves by setting small incremental goals instead of stretch goals in their personal and professional lives. Attainment of the former can create a series of small successes and heal low self-esteem.

When unfair treatment and appraisal are the cause of career depression, it is important to introspect upon whether one is actually being treated unfairly or whether it is a mere perception. If the former is true, then it is important to overcome inertia and look for a better, more equitable job. Individuals are often reluctant to switch jobs simply owing to the preconception that another job may not be available. However, this preconception needs to be evaluated against actual evidence regarding unemployment statistics, compensation levels for similar jobs, vacancies in comparable roles, among others. Support for this proposition is found in King (2004) who suggests that decisions about career paths need to be made not in a vacuum, but in the context of the broader world.

Finally, one of the best ways to prevent career depression is to make realistic and well-informed career choices (Cedefop, 2008). Individuals, particularly in developing countries, often aim for a career to fulfill family and societal expectations without due evaluation of their own predilections. Sometimes, they even lack proper knowledge of the requirements of the concerned job. Such an approach can be highly detrimental and lead individuals towards careers which are not aligned with their skills, qualifications, and personal characteristics. University graduates who have been fortunate enough to receive tertiary level education should not assume that a University degree by itself will guarantee a high-paying job and eventual career satisfaction. Rather, they should engage in evidence-based decision making to make rational career choices and avoid the pitfalls of career depression.

Role of Organizations

Organizations must play an active role to handle career depression of their employees. Since depressed individuals do not always feel comfortable sharing their troubles, it is imperative that organizations watch out for telltale signs of depression such as sudden tardiness, sudden lack of concentration, a growing tendency to procrastinate and other behavioral changes in employees (Baldeomar, 2018). When such signs are manifest, organizations must initiate open dialogue with the concerned employee to find out whether career related depression is indeed the reason behind the changes in behavior. If the answer to this question is yes, then the appropriate organizational response will depend on the root cause of the employee's depression. Flexible scheduling is one reasonable accommodation that is heavily supported by research (DeTienne et al., 2020), especially where stress and work-life conflict are causing depression. Organizations can assist depressed individuals to build self-efficacy to fight nervousness and adverse effect through setting small goals (DeTienne et al., 2020). Organizations must also remember that a proactive stance might be the best line of defense against career depression. In other words, while it is important to help employees who have already fallen into a state of depression, it is even more critical to ensure that toxic elements such as abusive supervision, low autonomy, political climate, inequity, etc. are not allowed to pervade the organization in the first place.

The Role of Counseling Practitioners

Depressed graduates can choose right career when their educational institutes offer them effective career counseling services. Universities which do not offer such counseling services should therefore contemplate offering the same and allocate both time and resources to this endeavor. Universities which already offer career counseling should encourage the concerned practitioners to be more vigilant in identifying individuals with higher chance of suffering depression and offering necessary help. Saunders et al. (2000) and Dieringer et al. (2017) for instance, suggest that standardized instruments such as career interest inventories, skill and ability measures, etc. can be used to better guide individuals into the right career track by matching individual and job characteristics. Also, empowering graduating students to make their own career choices, without familial or societal pressure, can also be a focal point for counseling as suggested by Yousef et al. (2017).

Conclusion

In conclusion, given the importance of a career in shaping the financial and social standing of adults, along with their self-esteem and identity, it is not surprising that disillusionment and/or dissatisfaction with one's career can lead to depression. Career depression is, therefore, a common phenomenon and the actual number of people suffering from it may be much higher than known due to limited understanding of the concept and the stigma associated with reporting depression. As discussed above, some of the common causes of career depression include lack of person-job fit, financial pressure, family expectations, career indecision, and work-life conflict. Wrong career choices may cause career depression among the graduates in many developing countries. This happens because of insufficient job opportunities, and impractical familial/societal expectations. There is no doubt that the dysfunctional consequences of ignoring career depression is significant. Hence, it is imperative to address this issue firstly by helping individuals to make a smooth transition from academic life to work life and secondly by helping them to find contentment in their careers. This will be possible only if conscious efforts are made not just by the graduates at an individual level, but rather by academic institutes, employers, and counseling practitioners at the collective level.

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