



# What should you do when life takes an unexpected detour?

By **NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG**

*Correspondent*

I noticed when I met with Amy, my physical therapist, that she was not her usual high-energy self. She had been training for the World Masters Track and Field Championships in Brazil, an event that happens only every other year. She sustained a tendon injury that made it impossible for her to go. She is beyond sad. She suffered an injury, but even more upsetting, she is suffering because she will be unable to participate. Amy is not alone in dealing with life when it doesn't follow the script.

Joan looked forward to a life of family,

a career and financial security. Instead, her first husband died at age 35. She succeeded in raising three children and remarried. Finally, her life was back on track, or so she thought, until her son married and became the father of three and the custodial guardian of his children when his ex-wife became mentally ill. Joan found herself flying back and forth to her son's home to help care for the children. She is distressed about the crises, but also about not being able to live the life she expected as a "happy" retiree.

Mark, a retiree living on a fixed income, watched helplessly as his son, who had a wonderful job in marketing, was out of

work for two years. He expected his son's career success to continue. Instead, he is filled with guilt because he cannot rescue his son.

And, finally, Molly became depressed when she realized her promotion was never going to happen. Not only wasn't she going to have the income she expected, but the disappointment challenged her assumptions about herself and eroded her self-confidence.

What happens when our plans get derailed, when our jobs are eliminated in our 50s and 60s, when we find ourselves caregivers for spouses, children, parents?






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Nancy Schlossberg

ence in 2010, the buzzword was “reinvention.” Why? Because, according to Lorin Drake, a researcher who spoke at the conference, boomers are facing unprecedented detours. Specifically, 39 percent of Florida boomers had lost a job, another 34 percent had faced a health problem, 15 percent were dealing with mortgage issues, and 25 percent were living with parents or an adult child. One boomer was quoted as saying, “I didn’t sign up for this.”

When I was a professor at the University of Maryland, I wanted to learn more about how people understand and deal with challenges. I call them nonevents — the marriage that never took place, the baby who never arrived, the promotion that never happened, the book that never got published. I worked with a team of graduate students interviewing people of all ages about how nonevents changed their lives. We found that nonevents are not all the same and that they differ in significant ways.

■ Some are personal, like Wanda who was unable to lose the 50 pounds she gained since college or Harry who was not able to retire as planned because of the economy.

■ Others are called ripple because they stem from someone else’s life, like Gail, the only one in her crowd who was not a grandparent because her two adult children never had children.

■ Many are resultant, that is they are the result of an event, like Amy’s torn tendon, which changed what she could do and what she expected to do.

■ Still others are delayed. You think you will never be a grandparent and then one of your children at age 45 has a baby or you think you will never marry and at age 70 you find someone and wed for the first time.

We all have dreams and expectations of what might have been. If we have not personally experienced a nonevent, someone in our family probably has. I was working with a graphic artist one day and told her about my research on the topic. She exclaimed, “I am too busy for nonevents.” Then, moments later, she said, “Actually, when I think of it, my father is a walking nonevent. He never had the promotions he expected, never made enough money to support his family. He was depressed, and to compensate he tried to micromanage my business.”

Nonevent transitions are unique. They are under cover, not celebrated or acknowledged. The basic challenge when dealing with nonevents is first to figure out when it is time to



accept that you might never be, for example, a CEO, a mother or a published author, and, second, to decide when to move on and go to plan B. Coping requires many strategies, but usually involves four steps:

1. Acknowledge and make public the lost dream. Nina told her best friend the story about not getting the job she wanted.
2. Grieve for the loss of your dream. Milt kept a diary showing the various emotional reactions he experienced when he realized he would never be a father.
3. Let go of old expectations by developing a ritual, as Martha did when she sent an announcement to all her friends that she was no longer looking for Mr. Right and that place settings were available at Macy's.
4. Finally, reshape or modify the dream. When Sid and Tamarara accepted that they could not have children, they decided to work in a preschool where they could devote their time to small children.

Clearly, dealing with broken dreams and unmet expectations is challenging. But listening to songs can sometimes put life in perspective. Just remember the words to the song by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields:

*Nothing is impossible I have found  
For when my chin is on the ground  
I pick myself up, dust myself off  
Start all over again  
Don't lose your confidence if you slip  
Be grateful for a pleasant trip  
And pick yourself up, dust yourself off  
Start all over again*

Sarasota resident Nancy K. Schlossberg, a former professor of counseling at the University of Maryland, College Park, writes self-help books, blogs, lectures and runs workshops on coping with change. You can contact her through [www.transitionthroughlife.com](http://www.transitionthroughlife.com) or at [nancyks4@gmail.com](mailto:nancyks4@gmail.com).

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