

A close-up photograph of a tree trunk with rough, textured bark. A small, green plant with long, narrow leaves and a small white flower is growing out of a hole in the bark. The background is a soft-focus view of other trees and foliage.

Remember
to
Look Up

35 Tips for Making a Comeback
in Your Job, Career, or Life



Susan T. Blake

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**35 Tips for Making a Comeback
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Making a Comeback When Times Are Tough

Everyone encounters setbacks. It doesn't really matter whether you've lost a job, lost a loved one through divorce or death, or lived through a natural disaster: Life-changing events happen to everyone at some point, and when your life has been disrupted, you have to make a Comeback. (Or not—it's actually up to you.)

Sometimes the setback is less life-changing, but it's a setback none-the-less: A project you've been working on has been cancelled (or failed in some way), you've been re-assigned, your department has been reorganized. Now what? You may have decisions to make, but you just don't feel capable of making them at this moment.

Or maybe your life hasn't been disrupted, but you're feeling stuck and you need a Reframe. Reframes can disrupt your life too, so be careful what you ask for. Don't worry, though—This little handbook can help with that, too.

The 35 tips in this handbook are all life lessons from my life. Some require discipline, others only openness. My life isn't your life, but we're not so different. At times we all have to rethink who we are, what we want, and what we want to be doing.

If you choose to Reframe or Make a Comeback, come on in! Hopefully this will help, and maybe give you a laugh or two at the same time. And that always helps.

1

Give Yourself a Break

Some things are within our control, and some things are not. Shit happens. We make mistakes. We fail. The challenge is to learn from it and move on.

At some point in my life I realized that as long as I tried to be perfect, I would always fail. Ouch! A life doomed to failure! That's a depressing thought. So I decided to focus on being Darned Good. I succeed pretty

frequently at that. Not always—I still fail. But I'd rather fail, admit it, learn from it, and move on than be stuck in always comparing myself to Perfection and always failing. Know what that leads to? Cover-ups. Dishonesty. Despair. Who needs that?

So you need a Comeback. Maybe life dealt you a cruel blow. Maybe you did it to yourself. Maybe it was a combination. Accept it, learn from it, make amends if necessary (and possible), and let's move on.

Do you know the Serenity Prayer? "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Whether or not you want to involve God, those three steps are a pretty good place to start a Comeback.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, The courage to change the things I can, And the wisdom to know the difference.

2

Get Some Rest

You may need time to heal.

Go ahead, take a break.

Get some rest.

It may be tempting to jump into frenetic activity. There's a gap in your life, and you want to fill it. That's understandable. Resist the temptation.

Rest. Heal. You may feel the need to be strong for the people around you. But consider that you can also set a good example by taking care of yourself and being authentic.

Having trouble getting out of bed? That's not unusual. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's "five stages of grief" apply to all kinds of changes, and depression is one of the stages.

Some of the ideas in this book can help, but if you need more help, don't be afraid to ask. You are not alone.



3

Appreciate Beauty

One of the first signals to me that I was coming up for air after my husband died was that I noticed something beautiful.

I had been putting one foot in front of the other, going to work, feeding the cats, managing to appear focused, but I was in a fog. And then one day I noticed Something Beautiful. Do you know what it was? It sounds silly to me to say it. It was a bowl of cherry tomatoes. Different shades of red and orange, it was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen. It was so beautiful I had to take a picture of it.

I didn't go looking for a bowl of cherry tomatoes to photograph. But I noticed them, and they made me want to notice more.

It's a crappy photograph, but it reminds me of that moment. The moment I started to connect back up with Being Here.



4

Get a Sense of Perspective

I was laid off 3½ years after my husband died. Being laid off sucked, and it hurt, and it was scary. It was a First. But I also knew, even as I was packing up my desk, that it wasn't the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

Maybe the reason you need a Comeback *is* the worst thing that's ever happened to you. But it's probably not the worst thing that *could* happen to you, even if it doesn't feel that way right now.



Taken from the top of the World Trade Center, 1982

5

Don't Isolate

It's really tempting to go off and lick your wounds. In fact, there is a time and place for that. But don't stay under the porch forever.



6

Meet as Many New People as Possible

This is easier for some people than for others. But go to as many free or inexpensive events as possible, and introduce yourself. You'll meet people who can help you, and whom you can help (which is good for your ego and your soul), and you'll get ideas. And you won't get dusty.



7

Go to As Many Events As Possible

Just like Meet As Many New People As Possible is easier for some people than others, this one isn't always easy. But go. There are a million ways to find out about them. Then Go. You'll find out about more while you're out there.

I have gone to everything I could, and I was reminded that one thing leads to another.

8

Remember That One Thing Leads to Another

After I was laid off, I began going to a networking group for job seekers.

At one of these meetings I heard about a free workshop on networking. So I went. In practicing my networking speech, I met four terrific people who have become important friends and colleagues.

One runs a foundation for which I now volunteer, and through which I have met other amazing people.



One found out I was a photographer and recommended me to photograph an event for a foundation for which she volunteers. It didn't pay anything but I learned a TON. She also introduced me to a friend of hers who needed people to help her launch an



Remember That One Thing Leads to Another

online community for organization development professionals. I met other great people through that project, and it led to other work.

Another woman not only agreed to let me interview her for a research project, but she referred me to three other people, who referred me to four other people, who referred me to other people—a series of referrals four layers deep.

The fourth woman and I just became really good friends. We compare notes. We go on adventures together. That's priceless.

Remember, everything has a ripple effect. This is only one example.

9

Learn to Appreciate Irony

After my husband died, and I was in agony for longer than I expected, I joined a support group. (Remember, “Don’t Isolate.”)

It made a huge difference to have people to talk to who really did know what I was going through. Even if our stories were not exactly the same and they were in different stages of the grieving process and coming back up for air.

Well, about six months after I joined the group, we held a potluck dinner. I will never forget looking around at the people at that dinner and thinking, “I am so lucky.” And the irony of that smacked me upside the head: We never would have met each other if we hadn’t lost the most important people in our lives. Go figure.



10 “When You’re Going Through Hell, Keep Going!”

That’s a quote from Winston Churchill. I love Winston Churchill. Do you know he was ridiculed by the rest of his government before helping to save The World As We Know It? Do you know he suffered from depression?

I heard this quote during the first year or so after my husband died, and it rang so true for me. Keep Going. I can sit here and wallow and feel bad forever, or I can keep going and trust that the people who’ve been through this and tell me “it will get better” are right.

A friend of mine has told me that she admires me, because when her father died her mother stopped living, and I didn’t. Don’t get me wrong: I didn’t go on like nothing had happened. In fact, I



couldn’t imagine the rest of my life without my husband, couldn’t see my future, so I didn’t think about the future at first. I just thought about Now. Today. This Moment. I put one foot in front of the other, and eventually I was Somewhere Else.

Keep Going.

11 Go On a Spirit Quest

A little over a year after my husband died, I took myself in hand and went to Yosemite. By myself. I had progressed beyond living One Day at a Time, as you can see. It was a big deal—it required planning beyond tomorrow, and it was my first solo trip (except for visiting family in Seattle, which doesn't count). I was starting to come up for air, and I needed to breathe. So I packed up the car with my camera, some drawing materials, some notebooks, and my favorite CD's, and off I went.



I was there for four days, and for the first day and a half my brain would not shut up. The chatter was incessant. I couldn't sleep.

Maybe it was because I was somewhere else. Maybe it was because I was somewhere quiet, and without the usual distractions. Maybe it was the altitude. I remember thinking, "There's something to be said for being able to hear yourself think—even if you don't like what you're hearing." I ultimately came away with some peace, and some clarity.

◆◆◆ 11 Go On a Spirit Quest



You may not be able to afford to go away, for time reasons or financial reasons. But make a commitment to yourself to do something at the same time every day—maybe go for a walk. Or go to the park and just sit. Go to a hospital and sit in the lobby. Wherever you go, take a journal, and write. Do it every day for a week—it may take that long if you can't get totally away. (Or longer.)

The point is, devote some time to listening to your inner chatter.

12 Keep the House Clean

OK, I admit, I struggle with this one. I don't have any tips for accomplishing it; in fact, one of my favorite authors, Robin McKinley, once said, "If I have a strange tidying impulse, I'd rather go outside and tidy the garden." I totally get that.

But I can tell you what happens if I don't keep the house clean: I end up in a mess! And that's a drag! And it's distracting! When there's too much clutter around I can't think. In fact, when I was in school, I found that I often had to clean my room before I could sit down to write a paper. (I don't *think* that was just avoidance...)



So if you need a little inspiration, do some housework. (Or yard work.) It will clear your head. It will give you a sense of control when life seems out of control, and a sense of accomplishment when you're feeling desperate to accomplish something. And as a former teacher and mentor once said to me...

13 “When You Surround Yourself With Tackiness, You Become Tacky, Too”

So avoid it at all costs.

14 Avoid Distractions

I know I just told you to keep the house (and garden) clean. But there are limits, and that means don't clean house to avoid doing what you should be doing. I have a friend who refers to this as “cleaning out closets.”

When there's something you have to do, do you find yourself cleaning out a closet instead? You're not alone. And there is a time and a place for it. (See “Keep the House Clean.”) But pay attention: Is this a pattern of avoidance? Are you cleaning out the closets to keep from doing something else?

15 Give Yourself Time

Rome wasn't built in a day. Seriously. Stuff takes time. That is not a pleasant thought in this Instant Gratification world, and it's a really unpleasant thought when you're going through Hell. (Remember, "Keep Going.") But the truth is, it takes time.

When I worked in social services, I was told that for the first two years that a person is in recovery, they're still "sick." (This was from a person who had been sober for many years.)

When my husband died, not only was I advised not to make any major decisions for a year, but a dear friend who'd been divorced for six years told me it might take five years to get back to "normal." (Eeek! Five years? That seemed like an eternity. But guess what...she was right.)

When I was laid off, it took me nine months to really figure out what I wanted. I remember thinking, "I could have had a baby by now!" Instead, I had Me.

Here's the thing: Don't just sit and wait. Keep Going. One step at a time. One foot in front of the other. One project after another. Make mistakes. Change your mind. Lather, Rinse, Repeat. Eventually you'll get somewhere.

16 Pay Off the Car



A year and ten days after I lost my job, when I was still Underemployed, I paid off my car.

Hurray! Touchdown dance in the parking lot! What a feeling of accomplishment! Was I still in debt? You bet. Did I still have money challenges? Of course. But what a great feeling! Which brings me to...

17 Celebrate Little Successes

Little successes are a big deal. They're good for morale. And they can add up to bigger successes. And they're good for morale. And they can lead to other things. And they're good for morale. They feed your enthusiasm for moving on to the next thing. Oh, and did I mention? They're good for morale.



There's nothing wrong with that.

18 Avoid Scarcity Thinking

I have a friend who went through three job hunts in three years. We got together at one point, and she was pretty much out of money, and she was being very, very careful with money. That's not a bad thing. In talking to her and hearing about how she doesn't start the car unless she has two errands to run in the same part of town, I thought, "That's pretty smart."

And then I thought, "That's *really* depressing." If I made all my decisions based on how little cash I have, I would never do anything. And my world would get smaller, and smaller, and smaller...



19 Be Grateful



Practice an “attitude of gratitude.” No, I didn’t coin that phrase. It’s a good one, though, isn’t it? Try it. The next time you’re feeling low, and bleak, and stuck, think of something you’re grateful for. Maybe it’s the love of family and friends. Maybe it’s the love of your dog (or cat, or...) Maybe you’re grateful for being laid off! Maybe you’re grateful for a kind word someone said. Or

that the car is paid off. Or for hot showers. Maybe all you can come up with to be grateful for is that you’re breathing out and breathing in.

Whatever it is, just focus on that for a few minutes. Where before you were only feeling this big, soon you’ll be feeling **THIS BIG**. And less stuck.

Now, get back to work.

20 Give Someone Else Something to Be Grateful For

It will give them the same feeling you just got. And it will give you a sense of accomplishment.

Now *that's* good for morale.

21 Don't Spend All Day Every Day in Front of the Computer

Go for a walk. Get some exercise. Go to a meeting. Meet a friend for coffee. Don't isolate.

22 Don't Spend All Day Every Day in Front of the TV

Comebacks are not born in front of the television. If you're gonna do that just give this book to someone else.



23 Don't Give In to Cynicism

Cynicism is dark, and limiting, and safe. It can be tempting to go there when you're wounded, but resist the temptation. It's a hard habit to break.

24 Get Some Inspiration

Read. Go for a walk. Go to a meeting. Go for a drive. Do something unusual. Pursue a hobby, or craft, or sport. Do something in a new way—sit in a different seat on the train. Use a different stall in a public bathroom. Do your hair differently. Go to the zoo. Clean house, if you must.



It's amazing how just shaking things up can start your creative juices flowing.

25 Do Something Silly

Seriously. Wear mismatched socks or earrings and see if anyone notices.



Buy—and wear—a Mickey Mouse tie. Have an April Fool's Day party and make everyone wear something silly. (I've been doing that since 2007.)



Play on the swings with the kids.

Don't push them, *swing*.



26 Cultivate a Sense of Wonder

Wonder how that pair of shoes got strung up over the telephone wire. Wonder whether that dog is a better driver than its owner. Wonder how your cat knows to wake you up at 6:23 every single morning. Wonder where the rainbow is when you notice that it's raining even though the sun is shining, and then look for it and stand in awe when you see it.

Wonder why someone responded a certain way—and then ask them.

Wonder why things are the way they are, and what you can do about it.



Wonder who knows how to do the things you don't know how to do, and go find them, and ask them to help you, or to teach you.

In his blog, Seth Godin wrote, "Wondering around is the act of inquiring with generous spirit." I love that!

Wonder. Be curious. And act on it.

27 Examine Your Beliefs

Beliefs can be the seat belt that keeps you from going through the windshield when life slams into you. Beliefs can be the hitching post that keeps your horse from running away. Beliefs can be the handhold that keeps you from flying off the planet into space when it feels like the world is spinning too damn fast.

But beliefs can also be the tether that keeps you from taking your next step, from pursuing your dream, from being all that you really could be.



If you don't examine your beliefs, you can't look at where they came from, look at whether they are (or ever were) valid, and choose whether you want to keep them or replace them. You can choose. But first you have to examine them.

28 Listen to Your Dreams

OK, the bad news is, there's a gap in your life. For whatever reason. The good news is, there's a gap in your life. That gap makes room for your dream to come to life. Listen to your dreams. Pick one to follow. Think you can't? See "Examine Your Beliefs." Don't have one? Or you've outgrown it? Or maybe your dream is broken and can't be fixed?

29 Find a New Dream

If you could do anything, what would it be? Don't think you can do that? See "Examine Your Beliefs." Don't know? Don't worry. Did you know there are such things as Dream Coaches? Neither did I. But there are, and they can help. Check out www.dreamcoach.com.

We humans have an unparalleled capacity to dream, to imagine. What would happen if you used it?



30 Make a (New) Plan

As Marcia Wieder, the original Dream Coach says, “The difference between a dream and a fantasy is a strategy.”

My niece dreamed of a sand castle. And she made a plan for how to build it. Then she asked for help, and it got built. If a five-year-old can do that, so can we.

Someone else once said, “Plan your work, then work your plan.” Pretty good strategy, if you ask me.



31 Listen to Others



Sometimes I need a reality check. Or a pep talk. Or advice. Or a new perspective. Or a laugh. Or a surprise. Or validation. Or enough options to make a good decision. Or someone to ask me the right question. Sometimes I'm wrong and I need to hear that.

If you have succeeded in not isolating, you have people to talk to. Go ahead.

32 Don't Listen to Others

Sometimes others are wrong. People speak from their own experience and fears and beliefs. What's true for them may not be true for me. "Feedback is about the giver, not the receiver." *
Take what you like and leave the rest.



Just remember, this works best when you have examined your beliefs and listened to your dreams.

* *What Did You Say? (Seashore, Seashore, and Weinburg)*

33 All Things in Moderation

Including moderation. It's true.

Listen to your dreams, but make them happen.

Don't isolate, but give yourself a chance to think.

Focus, but don't allow obsessive/compulsive behavior to distract you from what you should be doing.

Be generous, but don't use yourself up.

Be generous, but practice gratitude.

Don't worry, but don't sit around waiting to win the lottery.

Work really, really, really hard at something you love, but remember to rest and celebrate successes.

Focus on a goal and go after it, but don't be afraid to change direction.

Don't be afraid to change direction, but don't be a leaf blowing around in the wind.

34 Remember to Look Up

One day I was walking down the street, and I happened to look up. I couldn't believe my eyes—there was a lily growing up in the crotch of a tree! Growing. Blooming. Huh? What was it doing there? How did it get there?

It made me wonder. It made me marvel. It made me rejoice that something could thrive under adverse conditions. It made me think about something besides myself.

Remember to look up.



You never know what you might see.

35 “Never, Never, Never Quit”

There’s that Winston Churchill again. I love him.

You can rest.

You can change direction.

But never quit.

Never.

Summary

There you have it—some ideas on how to make a Comeback. People—and teams—get stuck, get derailed, and get dealt surprises that blow them off course or even shut them down temporarily. The operative word here is “temporarily.”

Sometimes the proper response is rest; sometimes it is action. Sometimes it is taking a moment to survey the situation and make a plan. The key is to be mindful and pay attention to what you need.

There aren't any hard and fast rules about the proper order for following these tips, either. Except for this: Put on your own oxygen mask before assisting the person next to you.

Beyond that, remember this: We're all in this together.



About the Author

Susan T. Blake specializes in helping people look at things differently and then move forward toward achieving their goals. Described at various times as “inspiring,” “dedicated,” “collaborative,” “ethical,” “the little train that could,” and “goofy,” she uses her unique blend of skills and experience to help individuals and teams to make changes that help them move forward.

Remember to Look Up

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