

Stop Worrying About How Much You Matter by Peter Bregman

For many years — almost as long as he could remember — Ian* owned and ran a successful pub in his small town in Ireland. Ian was well-known around town. He had lots of friends, many of whom he saw when they came to eat and drink, and he was happy.

Eventually, Ian decided to sell his establishment. Between his savings and the sale, he made enough money to continue to live comfortably. He was ready to relax and enjoy all his hard work.

Except that almost immediately, he became depressed. That was 15 years ago and not much has changed.

I've seen a version of Ian's story many times. The CEO of an investment bank. A famous French singer. The founder and president of a grocery store chain. A high-level government official. And these are not just stories — they're people I know (or knew) well.

They have several things in common: They were busy and highly successful. They had enough money to live more than comfortably for as long as they lived. And they all became seriously depressed as they got older.

What's going on?

The typical answer is that people need purpose in life and when we stop working we lose purpose. But many of the people I see in this situation continue to work. The French singer continued to sing. The investment banker ran a fund.

Perhaps getting older is simply depressing. But we all know people who continue to be happy well into their nineties. And some of the people who fall into this predicament are not particularly old.

I think the problem is much simpler, and the solution is more reasonable than working, or staying young, forever.

People who achieve financial and positional success are masters at doing things that

make and keep them relevant. Their decisions affect many others. Their advice lands on eager ears.

In many cases, if not most, they derive their self-concept and a strong dose of self-worth from the fact that what they do and what they say—in many cases even what they think and feel—matters to others.

Think about Ian. If he changed his menu or his hours of operation, or hired someone new, it directly affected the lives of the people in his town. Even his friendships were built, in large part, on who he was as a pub owner. What he did made him relevant in the community.

Relevancy, as long as we maintain it, is rewarding on almost every level. But when we lose it? Withdrawal can be painful.

As we get older, we need to master the exact opposite of what we've spent a lifetime pursuing. We need to master irrelevancy.

This is not only a retirement issue. Many of us are unhealthily—and ultimately unhappily—tied to mattering. It's leaving us overwhelmed and over-busy, responding to every request, ring and ping with the urgency of a fireman responding to a six-alarm fire. Are we really that necessary?

How we adjust — both within our careers and after them — to not being that important may matter more than mattering.

If we lose our jobs, adjusting to irrelevancy without falling into depression is a critical survival skill until we land another job. If managers and leaders want to grow their teams and businesses, they need to allow themselves to matter less so others can matter more and become leaders themselves. At a certain point in our lives, and at certain times, we matter less. The question is: Can you be OK with that?

How does it feel to just sit with others? Can you listen to someone's problem without trying to solve it? Can you happily connect with others when there is no particular purpose to that connection?

Many of us (though not all) can happily spend a few days by ourselves, knowing that what we're doing doesn't matter to the world. But a year? A decade?

Still, there is a silver lining to this kind of irrelevancy: freedom.

When your purpose shifts like this, you can do what you want. You can take risks. You can be courageous. You can share ideas that may be unpopular. You can live in a way that feels true and authentic. In other words, when you stop worrying about the impact of what you do, you can be a fuller version of who you are.

That silver lining may be our anti-depressant. Enjoying the freedom that comes with being irrelevant can help us avoid depression and enjoy life after retirement, even for people who have spent their careers being defined by their jobs.

So what does being comfortable with the feeling of irrelevancy — even the kind of deep irrelevancy involved in ending a career — really look like? It may be as simple as doing things simply for the experience of doing them. Taking pleasure in the activity versus the

outcome, your existence versus your impact.

Here are some small ways you might start practicing irrelevancy right away:

- * Check your email only at your desk and only a few times a day. Resist the temptation to check your email first thing in the morning or at every brief pause.

- * When you meet new people, avoid telling them what you do. During the conversation, notice how frequently you are driven to make yourself sound relevant (sharing what you did the other day, where you're going, how busy you are). Notice the difference between speaking to connect and speaking to make yourself look and feel important.

- * When someone shares a problem, listen without offering a solution (if you do this with employees, an added advantage is that they'll become more competent and self-sufficient).

- * Try sitting on a park bench without doing anything, even for just a minute (then try it for five or 10 minutes).

- * Talk to a stranger (I did this with my cab driver this morning) with no goal or purpose in mind. Enjoy the interaction — and the person — for the pleasure of it.

- * Create something beautiful and enjoy it without showing it to anyone. Take note of beauty that you have done nothing to create.

Notice what happens when you pay attention to the present without needing to fix or prove anything. Notice how, even when you're irrelevant to the decisions, actions, and outcomes of the world around you, you can feel the pleasure of simple moments and purposeless interactions.

Notice how, even when you feel irrelevant, you can matter to yourself.