

# The Good Identity Crisis: It Lasts Two Years, No Shortcuts

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN

Whether you've lost a job or a girlfriend, it won't take long before someone tells you, Dust yourself off. Time heals all wounds.

Yes, but how much time?

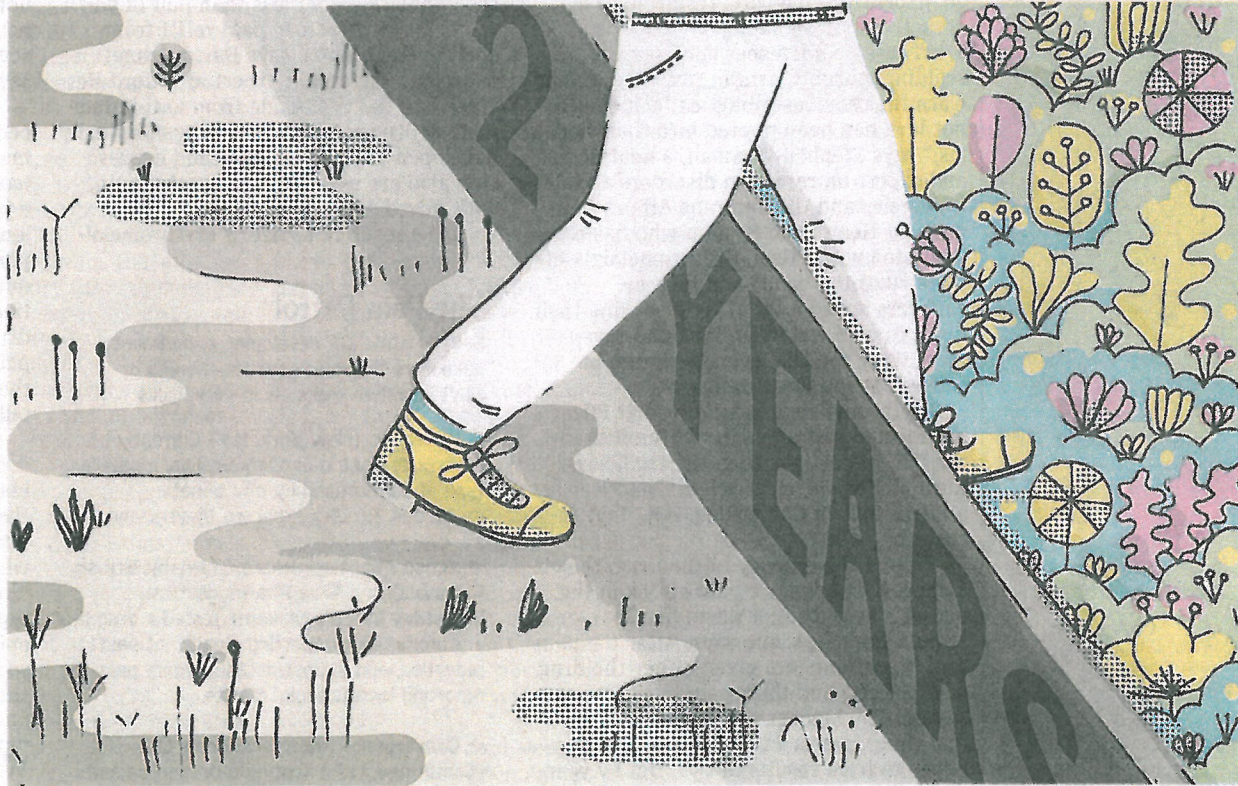
Experts say most people should give themselves a good two years to recover from an emotional trauma such as a breakup or the loss of a job. And if you were blindsided by the event—your spouse left abruptly, you were fired unexpectedly—it could take longer.

That is more time than most people expect, says Prudence Gourguechon, a psychiatrist in Chicago and former president of the American Psychoanalytic Association. It's

## BONDS: ON RELATIONSHIPS

important to know roughly how long the emotional disruption will last. Once you get over the shock that it is going to be a long process, you can relax, Dr. Gourguechon says. "You don't have to feel pressure to be OK, because you're not OK."

Some experts call this recovery period an "identity crisis process." It is perfectly normal, they say, to feel depressed, anxious and distracted during this time—in other words, to be an emotional mess. (Getting over the death of a loved one is more complicated and typically will take



James Gulliver Hancock

even longer than two years, experts say.)

Some people may find they need less than two years to bounce back from a divorce. But experts caution

that it probably doesn't pay to ignore the process, hurry it along or deny it, say, by immediately moving across the country to get a fresh start or diving into a new relationship. That

will probably only postpone the day of reckoning.

After all, it takes time to rethink all the things that may be disrupted by emotional trauma, such as one's

living situation, finances, professional goals and—maybe most important—how a person sees him or herself. There aren't any shortcuts. "The whole sweep of your life has to be reassessed and rewoven," Dr. Gourguechon says.

Four years ago, Michael Hassard filed for divorce from his wife of almost eight years and began attending a "divorce care" class at his Baptist church in Muscle Shoals, Ala. At the first meeting, the instructor said it would take two years to come out of the emotional turmoil.

"Hearing that was actually a relief," says Mr. Hassard, 42 and an engineer at a company that designs and builds chemical plants. "It gave me a finish line and a goal to work toward."

Mr. Hassard, who was awarded custody of his son and daughter, had been feeling depressed, angry, resentful and overwhelmed as a suddenly-single parent. He was sitting in class one night and began to see his recovery as the wall he'd had to scale on an Army boot-camp obstacle course. It was going to be tough. There was no way around it. But things would be better on the other side.

He went home and taped a note, titled "Two Years," onto the fridge. It said, "I am going to get back to normal, and I am going to do it right."

Please turn to page D3



# Meet the Good Identity Crisis

*Continued from page D1*

Recovering from a divorce or job loss actually involves two overlapping processes. There is the recovery from grief. And there is the even more time-consuming process of rebuilding the structure of your life. Where will you eat dinner? Who will your friends be? After all, if you are married, even if you hate your spouse, “you know when to show up and when to come home,” Dr. Gourguechon says.

If you saw the loss coming—say you initiated the divorce—you are ahead of a person who was caught off guard. A person taken by surprise is “required to do a lot more rumination,” says Sandra Petronio, a professor of communication at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. “You need to do some type of analysis about what

happened to you.”

“People start thinking they are crazy because the things they usually do to right their ship—things like talking to their mother, asking their friends for help, getting some sleep—don’t work anymore,” says Ilene Dillon, a licensed clinical social worker in Kentfield, Calif. “And you have all these emotions that won’t seem to stop.”

To help yourself get through the process, accept that there is nothing wrong with you, even if your emotions feel overwhelming. Remind yourself that this period will end. Tell your friends and family that while you may not be your typical self for a while, you still need their support and you will recover.

Don’t make any major, permanent changes, if you can help it, such as moving to a

new city. Therapy can help, so you won’t have to go through the process alone. As for a new relationship—forget about it.

During what he calls his own two-year “divorce recovery process,” Mr. Hassard revised the note on his fridge every three months or so, updating his progress and objectives. He targeted different areas, such as “self worth,” “facing my anger,” “being a good parent,” “forgiveness,” “moving on.”

“If you don’t rewrite your goals,” says Mr. Hassard, who has since moved to Centerville, Utah, “they start to become invisible.”

Sometimes small decisions tripped him up, such as which side of the bed to sleep on, or whom to call at the end of a good day. He kept a journal, burning his most bitter entries on the backyard barbecue grill. He sometimes cried or yelled while commuting alone in his car, rolling down the windows or dropping the convertible top to “let it all blow out behind you.” He waited more than a year to start dating, until he noticed himself “looking for good things instead of trying to avoid the bad.”

One night, when the two years were up, Mr. Hassard held a celebration. While the kids were at a slumber party, he cooked himself his favorite meal—bacon-wrapped chicken, green-bean casserole and garlic toast—and opened a bottle of Pinot Grigio.

Watching the sunset from his back porch, he assessed his progress and asked: “Am I done?” The answer, he says, was “Yes.”

“The finish line is only metaphorical until you make it real,” he says. “And I got there.”

## Recover and Rebuild

Getting over a divorce involves two overlapping processes—recovery from grief and restructuring your life. Where will you eat dinner? Who will your friends be? After all, when you are married, even if you hate your spouse, you know when to show up and when to come home, an expert says.



Write to Elizabeth Bernstein at [Bonds@wsj.com](mailto:Bonds@wsj.com) or follow her column at [www.Facebook.com/EbernsteinWSJ](http://www.Facebook.com/EbernsteinWSJ).