

# The reject pile

When Olivia Gagan lost her job, her boyfriend and her flat, her self-esteem plummeted. Little did she know that those losses would mark a turning point in her life

**H**ammering away on my keyboard at work to hit a deadline, I had no idea I was about to face the biggest rejection of my life. The big boss called me into a meeting room. The job had been tough in the five or so months since I had started. There had been terse emails from my line manager, who was increasingly critical of my work. I was struggling with the office routine, which started at 7am and ended with late-night drinking sessions most nights.

Despite this, and the fact that I was still on probation, I wasn't entirely sure what this talk was all about – until I realised that someone from HR was sitting in the room with a stack of paperwork, and the big boss was sliding a mug of tea across the desk to me with a grim face.

'It's not working,' he said. A ringing

noise started in my head, and I could feel heat rise up through my face. Chest thudding, I managed to squeak out something along the lines of, 'Please can I have a few more weeks to prove myself?'

'No, we'd like you to go now.' As in, please walk out the room, collect your things, and leave. What followed were the most humiliating 10 minutes of my life: in full view of my colleagues, I was being ejected from the building.

## Catalogue of catastrophes

My professional rejection followed hot on the heels of a romantic one. Some months previously, my long-term, live-in partner had broken up with me, with a list of reasons why he felt I wasn't right for him. Then, a few weeks after I lost my job, I achieved a hat-trick. My landlord

wanted to give his daughter the house I rented from him, so he needed me to leave. I was heartbroken, without a job and in need of a new home, fast.

I had gone, in a matter of months, from a coupled-up, cohabiting career woman, to an unemployed crying person living on a friend's sofa bed, which made me feel like a raging failure. In the weeks and months that followed, I was tearful and anxious, constantly on the watch for the next blow. I felt exposed: as though I was someone without the ability to handle work and love.

What I didn't realise at the time was that this period of my life marked a turning point. Until then, I had a story running in my head of what I thought my life would – or should – be like. Once the structure, many of the major characters and the

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setting were stripped away, I was forced to let go of the rigid expectations I had set out for myself.

### Time for a rethink

The positive changes started when I began to wonder whether I had some internal work to do.

Through talking to friends, family and a counsellor, a few themes started to emerge. My reactions to these rebuffs revealed how much of my sense of self was tied to other people's perceptions of who I am. My ex-boyfriend didn't want to be with me; I had jumped to the conclusion that I must be unlovable. One employer didn't want to work with me; I decided I must be bad at work in general.

The counsellor encouraged me to let go of these blanket assumptions about myself. Instead, he focused on establishing what my own unique qualities are. I realised I am never going to be able to drink my colleagues under the table – but get me on my own and I'm fun company. I cook a good roast. I return calls. Recognised and accepted, these traits, little and large, became a much more stable foundation for my self-esteem – built on my own positive and flexible opinions of myself.

### Confronting things head-on

The counsellor pointed out that talking to him was in itself another sign of change. Previously, whenever I had struggled, I would plough on, convinced I could eventually solve the problem on my own. I spotted a pattern of allowing uncomfortable emotions and situations to escalate, letting them grow into untameable thickets of problems, rather than doing regular maintenance on minor issues.

Both in my work and my love life, I had repeatedly failed to take care of and speak up for myself at crucial

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junctures. I made an effort to assert myself sooner – both at work and in my personal life.

### Finding creative outlets

It took a while, but I began to feel more confident in my capabilities. I decided to take advantage of being single and not tied down to a particular home; I pitched a work secondment to my next employer and spent three months in Paris. I had a brilliant time and my boss was impressed with my initiative and the results that came from it. I decided to channel some of my experiences into something creative and wrote a screenplay – something I'd never tried before – about the rough and tumble of climbing the career ladder. And so, that string of rejections led to some of the most rewarding, exciting things that have ever happened to me. Or more accurately, things I made happen.

Recently, an email from a former colleague from that doomed job dropped into my inbox. She had started work at a new company. They needed someone to help them out on a project and she had me in mind – would I consider it?

For a moment, the old ghosts swept back in. What on earth had she thought of me back then? What did she think

now? ‘Sure,’ I typed back. In doing so, I realised that that afternoon in the office had lost much of its sting.

I look back on that string of rejections almost as a day one: a rock-bottom for my self-esteem, from which the only way was up. I now believe rejections are not only an unavoidable part of life, but events which can provide the wisdom and fuel to send you in a better direction. Crucially, I no longer base my self-worth on the opinions of others. I'm not meant to be perfect for every job and every person, and that's OK.



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## Shining a light on mental wellbeing

Guy Winch is the author of *Emotional First Aid: Healing Rejection, Guilt, Failure, And Other Everyday Hurts* (Plume, £14.99), and has given a TED Talk on why we should prioritise our emotional health

### 1 Try to avoid self-criticism.

‘Rejection damages our self-esteem, therefore the last thing you should do when you’ve been rejected is to damage it further by becoming self-critical. Tempting as it might be to go through a list of all your faults, shortcomings and mistakes – don’t. If you must analyse what you did wrong, do so quickly and with empathy toward yourself, not anger.’

### 2 Don’t take it personally.

‘We often assume rejection is personal, when more often than not, it isn’t. Most rejections are due to issues such as fit, timing, and circumstance and not because of a crucial single flaw. If you want to feel better sooner, it is best to assume that the reason things didn’t work out was because of them, not you.’

### 3 Revive your self-esteem.

‘Since your self-esteem has sustained an emotional wound, you need to treat it and help that wound heal. The best way to revive your self-esteem is to affirm aspects of yourself that you know are valuable. Make a list of qualities you know you have that someone else is likely to appreciate and focus on all you do have to offer.’

### 4 Remind yourself that you belong.

‘As social animals, we have a need to feel valued and accepted by the various groups to which we belong. This feeling of belonging can become destabilised after a rejection. To recharge and reconnect to feelings of belonging, reach out to people who accept you and respect you, and remind yourself that you are loved.’