

Getting Unstuck

A whole-person approach to mid-career change - the foundations and evidence.

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Summary

ReOrient is a whole-person approach to mid-career change - chosen or forced - that helps a person find a direction of their own and build the capacity to move toward that direction. The approach treats stuckness as more than a career problem, and aims at agency rather than advice. Agency is rebuilt in practice: reclaiming a story, finding the through-lines wider than any job title, testing directions worth pursuing, and meeting each obstacle on both faces - the outer with a move, the inner with a skill. ReOrient is first a human approach that a person can work by hand with a notebook and a pen. Where an AI delivers the approach, the technology carries the thinking a licensed psychologist authored. The approach is grounded in well-established traditions, and clear about what the evidence does and does not support.

The problem

Somewhere in the middle of a career, a question can start showing up: "Is this it? Is this what I do for the next twenty years?" For some, the question is more urgent, and about money: "I can't afford to change, and I can't afford to stay. There are people counting on me." For someone who earned their living with their body, the fear can quickly tip into panic: "My body is how I make money, and it's giving out. How will I provide for my family?" For some, the choice was made for them: "I gave them years, and they let me go anyway. I did everything right, and it didn't matter." Then the search that goes nowhere: "I've applied to everything. I don't even get a reply." Underneath, for many, the same shame: "I should be grateful - so many people would want this. What is wrong with me that it isn't enough?" And for some further down, something quieter than shame: "I used to have plans. I don't even let myself want or dream anymore."

These are not the words of people who are failing. They are capable, experienced people who reach a point where the path they were on stopped working - or was taken from them. Some are stalled and still employed, doing the right things and going nowhere. Some were laid off, pushed out, or displaced by a field that changed. Others only sense that the work no longer fits, without yet seeing toward what. What they share is a mid-career transition that has to be crossed - often not of their own choosing - and the same whole-person stuckness in the middle of it. The problem is rarely a failure of effort or ability. The identity that carried them this far no longer holds, and the moves that always worked before have stopped.

Research documents this not as a narrow career problem but as a whole-person experience - structural, psychological, physical, relational, and bound up with identity, often all at once. The problem is rarely purely internal. Stuckness usually sits at the intersection of something inside a person and something hard in the world around them: a difficult market, financial pressure,

discrimination, dislocation. The usual fixes - a new résumé, better networking, generic advice - don't always address the root of being stuck, because they treat the surface and not the person. Guidance that meets the whole person and not just the résumé is hard to come by. ReOrient exists in that gap.

Five dimensions, at once. The research points to the same picture: mid-career stuckness is not one problem but several, active together. Structurally, nearly a quarter of mid-career professionals are stalled by conditions outside their control - the shape of a field, its ceilings and ladders, and pay that no longer keeps up with the cost of a life (Burning Glass & NYU, 2026; Kartika et al., 2025). Psychologically, stuckness is felt as much as understood - an emotion of unfulfillment as well as a situation (Treebak & Thomsen, 2021). Experience tends to conceal stuckness rather than protect against it, as capable people suppress the warning signs to guard a professional identity. Physically, the body carries the cost: chronic occupational stress does lasting harm (UMass Lowell; Kukić & Heinrich, 2025). Relationally, career difficulty and isolation compound each other, and transition is often navigated alone, in a "deliberate loneliness" born of shame (Masdonati et al., 2022; Chang et al., 2023). And at the center sits a question of identity and meaning - the widening gap between the constructed self and the actual self, and a drop in purpose in midlife (Kets de Vries; the MIDUS findings; Erikson). No one of these explains the others, and addressing any single one alone tends to miss the rest.

If you are in the middle of this, you likely don't need the research to tell you what you are already experiencing and feeling - and what stands in the way. Maybe it's the money - a mortgage, a family, a floor you cannot fall below, so the change keeps getting put off. Maybe it's the time - the days already full, with no room to retrain or explore. Maybe it is a credential you don't have, a market that looks closed, a field that moved on without you. Those are the outer constraints - not imagined, and not of your making.

Underneath them, quieter and usually heavier, are the inner obstacles: the fear that it is too late, or that you would only fail; the doubt that whispers who am I to do this; the shame of not having it figured out by now; an old story about what someone like you is allowed to want; and the particular grief of an identity - I am the one who provides - that no longer fits, but has not yet been replaced. And beneath all of these, for some, the quiet erosion of hope itself - the belief, worn thin by time and disappointment, that change is even possible. Hope of this kind is not restored by being told to stay positive; like agency, hope comes back in pieces, from evidence, as each step that works returns a little of what was lost. Most people carry some of both, outer and inner obstacles, at once.

Finding the way through a mid-career change is one of the harder things there is to do in life. The process touches a whole life, resists quick fixes, and does not subscribe to a single tool or a one-size-fits-all formula. Change like this requires difficult, sustained work over time, the ongoing prioritization of limited resources, and tough decisions made without a clear map. In addition, more than one kind of help is often needed - the person's own effort, the people around them, knowing how and when to recharge, learning about new market opportunities, and staying focused and accountable, to name just a few.

What "unstuck" means: Agency

The aim of our approach is agency - the restored and enhanced sense that your actions matter, that your choices count, that you have a say in what happens next. Everyone who arrives stuck has lost some of that, quickly or slowly. There is a compelling piece of evidence underneath the effectiveness of restoring and enhancing agency. When researchers followed people through a course of psychological work and tracked how they told the story of their own lives, the change that mattered most was a rise in agency - telling one's life as a story in which one acts and shapes what happens - and that rise did not merely accompany improvement; it came first, ahead of it (Adler, 2012). Agency is not a pleasant side effect of getting unstuck; it appears to be the thing that moves first and pulls the rest along. The whole approach is built to restore agency and open new directions that are your own - often novel recombinations of what you already carry.

The approach

The whole person. ReOrient works with a person whole, rather than treating "career" in isolation. In practice that means working, as they arise, with feelings (naming them, reading them as signal rather than being flooded by them), the body (the stress it carries, the energy it has to spend), thinking (catching the catastrophizing and the all-or-nothing story), relationships (isolation, the hard skill of asking for help), daily rhythm (a sustainable structure, on purpose rather than by willpower), work and direction (what you want, and the options open to you), environment and systems (naming the external constraints - a market, a system, the money that has to add up - and never mistaking a structural problem for a personal failing), and the story and identity underneath it all. No one works on all of it at once; a person can enter through whichever part is most pressing.

The Six Parts. Underneath the many entry points runs a single arc - six parts, walked in order the first time and returned to afterward, out of order, as the work asks. They are numbered here to give the work some structure, not to make a staircase.

- 1. Your story** - the whole shape of how you got here, in your own words, with you as the author again.
- 2. Your through-lines** - the strengths and capacities running across a working life, wider than any job title.
- 3. Pathways** - recombinations of those through-lines into directions worth testing.
- 4. Reality-grounding** - bringing a chosen direction into contact with the world.
- 5. What is in the way** - meeting each obstacle on both faces: the outer with a move, the inner with a skill.
- 6. Small moves** - low-stakes experiments that produce first-hand proof.

A person reclaims their story, getting the whole shape of how they got here onto the page, in their own words. The rest of the work grows from this story. They find their through-lines - the

strengths and capacities that run through their history, wider than any job title, and that survive a change of field. From those through-lines they generate pathways - new, grounded recombinations into directions worth testing, held loosely rather than chosen once. A direction might be a different role, a venture or small business of one's own, a passion turned into work, or a new way of framing the work someone already does.

A chosen direction then meets reality-grounding: what would have to be true for it to work - money, skills, time, people, timing - and what people already doing that work say about it from the inside. The purpose is to see a direction clearly enough to choose with open eyes, and to learn early what no amount of planning could tell them.

Then comes what is in the way, and finally small moves. ReOrient does not push any particular direction; it helps a person find one that is their own and test it against the world.

Our approach also holds no preferred answer about what work should be. For one person the direction is a passion made into a living; for another it is a steady job that pays the bills, chosen on purpose, with meaning drawn from a life outside it - time with a child, a craft, a place, a community. Work to live and live to work are both ways of living a life, and neither is a failure. Part of the work can be grieving a dream: one that will not arrive, or one put away so long ago the wanting itself went quiet - and then finding what can be wanted now. Sometimes the direction is not a bigger dream but permission to want something ordinary fully.

Our approach also attempts to overcome what is in the way, formulated as an obstacle having "two faces." The outer face is the constraint itself - the money, the missing credential, the thin market - met with a practical move, not a change of attitude. The inner face is what that constraint carries - the fear, the shame, the old story that it cannot be done - met with a practiced skill. You do not out-plan a paralyzing fear, and you do not out-mindset a financial floor. ReOrient addresses both faces.

More often than not, the inner face is what stops someone - the constraint is there, but the fear, the shame, or the old story makes it feel bigger than it is - which is why our approach treats the inner work as central rather than soft: fear met with one small brave act, shame met with self-compassion, the old story noticed and re-authored, each a skill a person practices rather than a pep talk they receive. They take small moves, because people do not think their way into a new life so much as act their way in, one low-stakes experiment at a time.

The learning loop. Inside every step runs the same loop, drawn from learning science: understand what is happening and why (a specific understanding, not generic information); try one small practice grounded in that understanding; then bring it back - return with what happened when you tried it, and see what has shifted, including the shifts a person cannot see in themselves. That last step - outside feedback on the gap between where a person is and where they are trying to get - is the ingredient the research says most people most lack.

How change compounds. Restoring agency does not happen by persuasion, but is restored and enhanced by evidence. Each small move that meets the world produces a small, concrete result, and that result is proof - the first-hand mastery that rewrites "I can't" into "I did" more durably than encouragement. Confidence follows action rather than preceding it, which is why the approach moves a person to act early and small rather than wait to feel ready. The two faces of an obstacle heal each other: meeting the inner fear cuts the obstacle back down to its true size so the practical move becomes possible, and taking the practical move produces the win that dissolves the fear. Small move, small proof, a little more agency, a slightly smaller next wall - a new direction gets built.

First the whole picture, then the step. Our approach starts with the whole picture of a person before any technique, so that the next step is the one their own situation points to, not a tip pulled from a menu. Over time, the work becomes a daily practice of small, on-purpose choices and steadily built skills, which is where a new direction gets made.

The approach stands on its own

A principle sits underneath everything: if our approach does not work without technology, then it is broken - technology is doing the work, not the approach. ReOrient is, first, a human approach - the kind of structured, reflective work a good practitioner does with a person, and the kind a person can do with a notebook, a pen, and the willingness to do the often difficult work of being straight with themselves. ReOrient's companion, The Paper Edition, is the whole approach, to work through by hand, alone. A further companion, The Dyad, shows the same work done with another person - because at its core this is trust between people, not technology. If the approach works for you on paper, that is the point. What technology adds is reach - breadth, and presence in the moments no schedule can cover.

Technology can also work against growth and learning. The growth that comes from pen, paper, and time to reflect is easily lost to speed and convenience. Writing by hand is slower than thinking - and that is the point. Writing makes you choose the words, and choosing the words is how you find out what you mean. A worry can circle in your head for years without resolving. Set down in your own handwriting, it becomes something you can see, question, and answer. That is a clarity a screen, with its speed and interruptions, rarely allows.

What works for career change: a brief review

The research on what causes mid-career stuckness is strong; the research on what resolves it is thinner. A longitudinal study of 1.3 million professionals found roughly one in four mid-career workers stalled - five or more years without meaningful advancement - and concluded the problem is largely structural, not a personal failing (Burning Glass Institute & NYU, 2026). Qualitative work describes stuckness as both an emotion and a situation, one that information and advice alone do not move (Treebak & Thomsen, 2021); identity research locates its center in the widening gap between the self a person built around their work and who they are (Kets de Vries; the MIDUS findings).

Several findings shape the ReOrient approach. Skill and capacity are built not by information but by deliberate practice with feedback, and feedback - an outside view of the gap between where you are and where you are trying to get - is the ingredient most people lack. The capacities that predict better transitions - confidence, curiosity, and planning despite uncertainty - are learnable, not fixed traits (Barclay & Stoltz, 2016; Koen et al., 2012). A self-directed, values-driven orientation predicts career satisfaction (Herrmann et al., 2015). Turning intention into action has its own evidence: specifying in advance when and how you will act - an if-then plan - and holding a wished-for future against the present obstacle both improve follow-through, whereas positive fantasy alone can quietly undermine it (Gollwitzer, 1999; Oettingen, 2012).

Reviews of career-counseling research point to a consistent handful of effective ingredients - written exercises, individual feedback, world-of-work information, models of what is possible, and social support - each of which maps onto a part of this work. Work-focused approaches outperform generic ones for people struggling specifically at work (Persson Asplund et al., 2023). Across the literature, the relationship - the sense of not doing it alone - is not a nicety but a mechanism (Masdonati et al., 2022; Chang et al., 2023).

Career change is also increasingly understood as story work. Modern career counseling treats the task as authoring and revising the story of one's working life across the gap between an old role and a new one - the "life design" approach (Savickas et al., 2009) - and studies of people in major transitions find that this story work is part of how they find their way through (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). This is the research directly beneath ReOrient's focus on the guiding narrative and through-lines.

Much of what a person needs in a transition is needed in the moment - when the fear lands on a Tuesday, when a small experiment either pulls or repels. A body of research on delivering support at the point of need, in daily life, adapting to a person's changing state (Nahum-Shani et al., 2018; Heron & Smyth, 2010) describes what a well-designed guide can do that no weekly session can. But the same research carries a warning: digital tools are notorious for disengagement, with most people stopping within weeks (Baumel et al., 2019). The lesson from both: in-the-moment reach only matters if the person keeps showing up, and what keeps people showing up is a relationship and a goal that both matter to them.

There is a gap in the research. Most rigorous career-intervention research studies students and job-seekers, not experienced professionals navigating mid-career stuckness. Outcome data for a program of exactly this kind, with this population, does not yet exist. Because of this, we have prioritized building ReOrient carefully and will diligently measure the results.

Theoretical foundations

ReOrient sits in the "third wave" of behavioral therapies - the acceptance-, mindfulness-, and values-based traditions. Its closest single relative is ACT (Acceptance and Commitment

Therapy): the movement from clarifying what matters toward committed action maps directly onto ReOrient's work of finding a direction that is yours and acting your way toward it.

The ReOrient approach forms an individual picture of what is stuck for this person and draws on the relevant process at the relevant moment, rather than running everyone through a fixed protocol. Around that backbone, the approach draws on several well-established traditions: stabilizing before exploring (from trauma-informed and body-based work); attention to the body and nervous system; narrative identity, where a life is made coherent through the story a person authors, and re-authoring that story toward agency is itself a change (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Adler, 2012); emotion-focused work, which treats feelings as information; a stance that never mistakes a structural problem for a personal failing; the psychology of coping, matching a practical move or an inner skill to what is in a person's control (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, the basis of the two-faces model); a motivational core drawn from self-determination theory (autonomy and competence); and self-efficacy, the finding that confidence is rebuilt through first-hand mastery rather than encouragement (Bandura, 1977).

Two traditions do the most to shape the approach. Narrative identity is why the guiding narrative sits at its center: a re-authored story is what starts to restore agency. Self-efficacy is why the approach leans on small concrete wins: confidence is built through mastery, not encouragement.

Human intelligence, delivered by technology

ReOrient can be delivered by an AI guide, in which one principle governs: human intelligence, delivered by technology. The two halves do different work. The human authors what no model produces on its own - the whole-person framework, the judgment about what is safe and how deep to go, the questions that open things, and the crisis protocol. We built it into the working logic of the approach and the prompts the guide runs on - what it attends to, in what order, and when it presses or waits. The model is carrying out an approach a licensed psychologist authored. The technology carries that thinking into far more of a person's life than any single practitioner could reach: present when a moment arrives rather than when an appointment falls; holding the whole thread across time; patient past the point any schedule allows; and without the social performance that can make a person guard what they say.

The guide can also hold the structure a long change needs: gathering what surfaces across many sessions, synthesizing it into something coherent, remembering what a person said they would do, and following up - keeping them organized and accountable to their own commitments.

The technology also brings a breadth no one practitioner can hold. Technology can read the wider landscape of work - where a field is growing, what adjacent roles exist, which recombinations of a person's strengths open directions they had not seen - and make that legible enough to act on. What can feel from the inside like "there is nothing out there" becomes a map of real options, and the person chooses with a clearer view of the terrain. Used well, it

holds that knowledge about what is durable and what changes fast, so the map informs a choice without purporting certainty.

Neither half is the product alone. A general assistant has the reach but none of the expert grounding; a human practice has the depth but none of the reach. ReOrient is the two deliberately joined.

The boundary

ReOrient is guidance and learning - not therapy, and not crisis support. The approach works with what a person can notice in everyday awareness; what lies deeper, or what is acutely dangerous, calls for a different kind of help. When something arises that needs a therapist, a physician, or a crisis line, the right response is to say so and help the person find it. Naming that limit is not a weakness in the approach; it is part of what makes the rest trustworthy.

What the evidence supports

We claim what the evidence supports, and try not to overclaim. On the problem side, the evidence is solid: large-scale and longitudinal research documents the scale of mid-career stalling as a felt experience that information and advice alone do not resolve, and its whole-person dimensions. On our side, the picture is more modest: the traditions ReOrient draws on are well-supported, but rigorous outcome data for a program of exactly this kind, with this population, does not yet exist. So the framing we hold is: ReOrient is grounded in evidence-based approaches - not, and we do not call it, a validated clinical treatment. We are committed to building outcome evidence as part of the work ahead.

Where this approach came from

ReOrient did not begin as an app; it began in the years of clinical practice as a licensed clinical psychologist in California, across a wide range of settings - a 24-hour suicide and crisis line; inpatient psychiatric and forensic units; community mental health; trauma recovery with refugees and asylum seekers displaced by forced migration; an Ebola treatment unit in Liberia; chronic-pain rehabilitation programs for injured workers; hospital work alongside children and families facing serious illness; and, now, psychotherapy with adults in private practice. That work has meant sitting with people carrying nearly every kind of difficulty a life can hold.

Underneath the particular diagnoses and settings, the same human themes kept surfacing: the search for meaning when an old identity no longer fits; the fear that stands between a person and the thing they most want; grief for a life that did not go as planned; the weight of financial strain, and the way it rarely stays contained to the one person carrying it - how it ripples outward into a marriage, onto children, through the whole family; and the slow rebuilding of the belief that one's own actions still matter. Those themes don't belong to any single condition; they run through nearly everyone who sits down to do this work.

One setting concentrated every one of those themes at once: years spent with injured workers in chronic-pain rehabilitation - people who had often lost not just a job but a role, an identity, an income, and the sense that their choices still counted, all while carrying the injury in their bodies and the grind of a bureaucratic system through their days. That is whole-person stuckness in one of its most concentrated forms.

The approach also came from my own turns. I have made this kind of change more than once - and I am in the middle of another one now, building this while carrying the same financial pressure and uncertainty I am describing here. What helped, each time, was ordinary and slow: writing down where I was rather than where I thought I should be; finding the threads that had run through every version of the work; testing a direction against people already living it, before I felt ready; and taking steps small enough to take while still afraid. Circumstances changed last. The sense that my own choices still counted changed first.

The approach has a second origin, in people. Three relationships in particular shaped what it became. Many conversations with Jessica about her own life - and a serious illness that had turned her from the path she was on - became one of the seeds of ReOrient: the very thing the approach is for, lived out and worked through in the kind of trusting relationship that lets a person find a way forward. Jess Heron and I have been close friends since high school; about seven years ago we began collaborating in earnest, and a deep, tested trust grew out of that work. Jess now oversees the technical and business infrastructure that carries the approach to people. Later we met Ahmet, a multi-talented builder who is bringing these ideas to life in technology. This project and shared work grew out of trust and friendship.

So ReOrient is a composite: not born only of literature and research, but drawn from the work itself - the many different threads of what I have done with people over those fifteen years, gathered into one place and one approach a person can walk through - and from my own path through change as well. What consistently helped, in every version of it, was never a technique applied to a problem, but a relationship: the kind of trust in which a person can begin to believe in themselves again, and from there do the work of finding a way forward. That trust is the through-line from the clinical work to this approach, and why the guide proposes and never declares, why nothing becomes "true" about a person until they confirm it, why the aim is agency rather than advice. The technology is new. The relationship it carries - trust, in service of a person's own direction - is what good help has always depended on.

The companion pieces

This paper is the first of three companion pieces. The Paper Edition is the approach itself, laid out to work through by hand, alone. The Dyad - currently an early, experimental piece - is the same approach walked with another person. Each stands on its own; together they are the argument, the solo practice, and the shared practice.

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(A fuller annotated bibliography is maintained separately - see the Research Foundation.)

