

A Spinster's Guide To Dole “Bludging” Purgatory (Name Withheld)

(Adelaide, 2015)

I'm a single woman living in share accommodation. I've been unemployed for three years now, and haven't done any paid work since 2010. Years ago, I decided to go to university in order to become a professional, work in a meaningful job, and earn good money, so that I could take care of myself when I got older. Apparently, I'm unemployed because I've made *bad* choices in my life, or I'm *too lazy*, or that lovely talk back radio word, a *Job-snob*.

I graduated with a Master degree. Oh yes, a clever girl and key scholar! I studied full time for as long as I could, and then went part time. I managed to get some casual work here and there doing cleaning jobs, until I thought I needed experience in my new found career area. They call it an *internship* to make it sound professional, but you often sit around doing stuff all, and dreaming that your new found career is just around the corner. In between lectures and tutorials and all that reading and writing, I kept a nice exercise routine going. I was a very happy individual.

Early menopause is an ugly word. In my late thirties came bone-crushing aches and pains in my lower back, which eventually raced up my spine to my neck. Not good if you plan on sitting in front of a computer screen or reading. I also developed Iritis, a strange eye disorder which causes immense pain and repeated visits to the eye hospital with dilating drops and steroid drops every hour. It feels as if someone has squirted shampoo directly into your eye for hours on end; the pain is unbearable My GP tells me that I have a lot of arthritis for someone so young, as well as degenerative disc disease and osteoarthritis.

Arthritis is also not well understood and yet it is the second most common disability in Australia. People associate it with old age, but according to Arthritis Australia, 60% of Australians with arthritis are aged between 15 and 64. One in three will have to leave work early or reduce their hours to cope with it.

Online application after online application went out week after week. I kept in contact with all my networks, but to no avail. I managed to pick up some tutoring work at uni. I worked for one semester, but then got no more extra work. By this time I had already applied for Newstart benefits and was given a case manager from my Job Service Provider (JSP). They didn't actually help you to find a job, but do continually asked about what barriers you had to finding employment, and you had to go through providing evidence to your case manager of looking for work. I once spent two excruciating hours sitting in a 'job club', looking through local newspapers, and waiting for a vacant computer to work on.

Soon I had a new case manager, who suggested I join the Army Reserve! I declined, saying I was over fifty and carrying arthritis, so I would fail the medical test. After protesting about my chronic back and neck pain I was sent to Commonwealth Rehabilitation Services (CRS), who dealt with people who have a disability. I thought I would get the support I need; like physio and hydrotherapy. However, I was first functionally assessed over the phone by a Centrelink staff member who deemed me capable of working 15 hrs a week.

I wanted to work, but needed support. I went to CRS, had a lengthy interview, filled out another employment plan and was introduced to another case manager. I was also offered a gym membership ! The fortnightly interviews discussing my barriers to employment continued and I had yet another case manager. Depression had now sunk in. I gained around 13 kilos. At some point I stopped showering for a couple of days each week. I only went out when I absolutely had to.

Twelve months on from being with CRS and I have been given absolutely nothing in the way of support. They keep telling me they are putting together a case for Centrelink. My young, ineffective case manager made belligerent comments when I asked her for assistance with physiotherapy. My manager shouted, "I've got arthritis, everyone over a certain age has arthritis!" I protested, but she kept interrogating. By this stage I was reduced to a simpering, mumbling female. "Well there you go", she interrupted. "Look let's face it, you're fat."

I can't predict when I'm going to be sick, and some days my pain is better than others. All of the GPs I spoke to, including my physio, did not understand the rules and laws of Centrelink and Job Service Providers. The more assertive you are with them, the more they appear to think you're trying to rip off the government..

I am fed up, frustrated and beaten. I refuse to show up for my interviews. So that means I'm breaching my mutual obligations, which is funny, cause I don't remember agreeing to the *mutual* bit. You get endless text messages and bits of paper in the mail informing you of your outrageous behaviour and what you immediately need to do. If you don't contact them within the required amount of time everything stops. No more health care card, no more transport card, no more money. Everything comes to a screaming halt.

In 2013, I rang CRS to explain that I wanted out and was moving to a new JSP; someone closer to home. I was at all times cordial with the service. My case worker took the words right out of my mouth when she said, "this is nothing personal." I agreed. I simply felt the service wasn't meeting my needs. Extracting oneself from one JSP to another is no quick business. They don't let you go lightly. Before I could sign my release forms and experience freedom, we had to go over the barriers to my unemployment. I mentioned my arthritis, my age, and government policies that have reduced funding to my professional area of expertise. I am not considered disabled enough by the government for the disability pension. However, I don't want disability for the rest of my life. What I do need and want is enough money to be able to support myself and my disability until I get gainfully employed.

I want this for any Australian who has to totally rely on Newstart and Job Network Providers to survive. And yet, without the necessary financial supports, working again seems to be becoming a distant memory for me. When life throws you lemons - make Lemonade! However, I don't seem to have the right recipe or the right lemons, because I just wind up with sour juice.
