

A cartoon illustration of a factory floor. Several yellow robotic arms are shown, some holding blue cups. One robot in the foreground has a sign that says "AI". Speech bubbles from the robots say "HAPPY LABOR DAY" and "CHEERS". The robots are holding blue cups, and more cups are on a conveyor belt.

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Opinion

For American workers, the most traumatic episode in their lifetimes might very well be getting fired.

It triggers intense financial turmoil, emotional shock, and the loss of a person's identity, according to Dr. Sherrie Bourg Carter, [writing in Psychology Today](#) . That's because the average American spends 90,000 hours at work, or a third of their waking life, so that the job, for better or worse, defines who they are.

Secondary consequences of being “let go” or laid off consist of damage to both physical and mental health — and to personal relationships, including one's marriage.

The most common reasons for a worker receiving the dreaded pink slip are attendance, incompetence (not completing tasks on time, for example), insubordination (disobeying a superior's order would do it), misconduct like sexual harassment, and inappropriate use of social media. That's according to [the Asbill Law Group of California](#) , a firm that specializes in representing laborers wrongfully terminated.

And few of us are immune. We all know someone, a friend or relative, who has gotten the boot. Studies indicate that [40% or more](#) of all workers experience getting fired at least once during their careers. Which means that close to half of everyone reading this knows what it's like.

Me, too. In my very first full-time job, I stared into the black hole of job termination. I was 16 when hired at Drexel Screw Products on Chicago's south side, thanks to my Uncle Eddie, the sales manager for the plant, who put in a good word.

Honestly, it was not a great introduction to the world of work. Drexel was a dark, noisy, and unsafe factory with no air conditioning when I signed on during a hot and humid summer. My duties included carrying heavy bars, 12 feet long, of iron, copper, bronze, aluminum, brass, or stainless steel to 18 Browne and Sharpe screw machines that cut and shaped nuts, bolts, screws, rivets, and various other metal parts.

All but one of the men and women operating the machines, a 20-year-old fellow who was the next youngest after me, were missing fingers.

Before hauling the bars out from the supply room, I had to taper the end of each with a power grinding wheel for easier feeding into the spindles. One morning, the shop foreman, whose name was Florian, or Flo for short, had to flush a metal particle out of my eye with saline solution, after which the company provided me with a pair of safety goggles. But sparks still flew and hot metal bits still stuck to my arms and face every time.

Because I had to take two buses to Drexel every morning, or thumb a ride when the transit authority didn't come through, I was frequently late to work, sometimes by 10 or 15 minutes and occasionally longer. And, one fateful

Wednesday after I'd been late three days in a row, Flo came into the supply room and said the bosses told him to fire me.

I hated the job: the stifling heat, my sweat-soaked clothes, my burning skin, the head-achy noise, and the nauseating smell of hot oil. But I hated way more this punch in the gut and the profound feeling of failure and loneliness. I was an outcast, rejected by the real world. I dared not say anything, knowing I'd break down.

"I refused," said Flo.

He saw my confusion and put a hand on my shoulder. He explained how he had told the bosses I was a good kid and always filled the screw-machine racks at the end of the day. My lateness had never slowed production, and the job was still mine.

I forced a smile while still fighting tears, awash in conflicted emotions. I appreciated Flo going to bat for me, snatching me clear of the abyss. But, suddenly I wished he hadn't.

I soldiered on at Drexel, mostly out of gratitude to Flo, but eventually gave notice. It was a hellish and dangerous place whose owners were hardly my friends. Had they offered to double my \$1.25-an-hour wage, I still would not have stayed.

My mother, a devout Catholic, thought the firing order was a blessing in disguise, a wake-up call, and Flo's rescue a gift from God. I didn't buy it but kept it to myself.

Years later, I realized she may have been partly right. Working dozens of jobs over the next five decades, I managed successfully, though seldom easily, to make myself "fireproof."

I never wanted, nor would I ever feel, that deathly emptiness again.

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