

The Confidence to Climb Down

I remember climbing up the tree with its perfectly placed branches. Left hand, right foot, right hand, left foot: one followed the other with ease, as if I were part squirrel. I had my sights set high on the perfect perch that would essentially earn me the title of King of the Castle or Princess of the Playground when, suddenly, my focus was interrupted with a familiar shout, “That’s high enough!” Had I not lost this argument at least a dozen times before, I would have considered expressing my sincere desire to reach my perfect perch. Instead, however, I conceded and decided to turn back. Turning back, hmmm: sounds simple enough, but somehow turning wasn’t happening, and finding the footholds going down and backward was much more difficult. The same hands and feet that climbed up with great ease were now blindly flailing for the branch that seemed to have disappeared. Why is climbing up so much easier than climbing down?

Clearly, when climbing up, I can see where I am going. I have a goal, a plan, and training on how to get there. That was the case with my clinical pharmacy career. Pharm.D. degree – check! Residency – check! Faculty/clinical pharmacist position – check! Then a not-so-familiar voice said, “That’s far enough.” It was a voice I had not previously heard during this career climb. It was that of my husband and my young son. They had always cheered me on in this climb, but now, my husband had finished graduate school, and we needed to move for his position. We both agreed that, if at all possible, I would stay home with our kid(s) more than I worked. So we packed up our little family and our few possessions and moved to a new city in a new state.

When opting to pause their careers, some manage to do a half-turn and gracefully swing from branch to branch until making a perfect soft landing, like retiring after a long, successful career. Not me; I think I more resembled a typical cartoon character that slips and falls from branch to branch until it painfully lands on its backside: an accurate representation of me trying to teach my son how to nap, not to lick the floor, and to pee in the potty. All the while, I felt very disconnected from everything that was familiar: work, friends, family, and achieving goals.

Fast forward a few years and a couple more kids: I find myself ready to dip my toes back into the waters of employment. So slowly but surely, I start to climb again. However, this time, the feat is quite different. I climb at a much slower pace than during my original ascent, and of course, I have to make up ground from my earlier fall. Moreover, this time, I don’t just see the perfect perch at the top of my tree. Instead, I take the time to enjoy the view from each branch. Also, I’m more likely to offer a hand to pull up a fellow climber and to climb down to give others a boost, including my husband and my children.

As life allows, climb your clinical pharmacy career ladder at a ferocious pace and bask in the joy that comes with it. But if ever the need arises for you to climb down, do so with confidence, knowing that the next ascent will be an entirely different – albeit often improved – adventure.

About the author: Keri Sims is a consultant for ACCP who focuses on resident and fellow membership and journal operations. After 13 years, she can say that none of her three sons knows how to nap; however, they rarely lick the floor, and they all pee in the potty (most of the time).