Changing course in the middle of your career can feel a bit scary, but it doesn’t have to. Perhaps you are thinking of taking a new position in your field, or changing disciplines all together. Maybe you want to transfer out of academia into the private sector or vice versa. Or possibly you are contemplating moving to a new state or country. Whatever mid-career (approximately 10-15 years in) alteration you are considering, you can channel any fear you have into excitement about the adventure that awaits you. And you can really bolster your confidence if you do the following: 1) Create and follow a plan that will help you achieve your near-term and long-term goals; and 2) Recognize that you are in control.

The idea that you are in control is especially crucial to maintain your mental (and even physical) health as you plan and execute a mid-career change. Realize, with confidence, that you are calling the shots, and while other forces (be it family, environment, industry trends, etc.) may influence your decision-making process, YOU are the only person who is making the decision for yourself. Since you are the decision-maker, you have an incredible amount of power. No one is making you do anything. You have surveyed your career ecosystem, and you have decided you want to make a change. Good for you!

So as you prepare for your change think about the following; Seek to understand your reasons and goals for wanting to change. Before you take any plunge, it is vital to understand *why* you want to make the change, and *why now* is the time to do so.

Ask yourself: what is it about my situation I want to alter? Is it the type of assignments or the environment I am encountering in my organization? Do I like the work but want to change bosses? Do I like my field but want to conduct my research in an industry setting? Do I hate my work and want to bake cupcakes all day instead?

Write out on a piece of paper (so you can visualize) two columns – what I like and what I hate about my present situation. You can do this exercise for all of the jobs, internships, research assistantships, and volunteer and leadership experiences you have had throughout your career to compare them to your current job.
identifying what you loved and loathed about each experience, you can map out exactly what it is you want to change, why now is the time you want to make the change, and where you want to go. Since you are the decision-maker, you have an incredible amount of power.

Seek to understand how you will go about making the change. Develop a plan that includes timelines and deadlines, major goals and daily goals, and steps to take to achieve each milestone. For example, if your overall goal is to stay in academia but move to Japan and do your research there, then daily goals may include networking and contacting potential collaborators, exploring what are the right institutions and labs for your investigations, and researching the culture, language and funding opportunities available in the country.

You must be flexible, and you must build that flexibility as well as contingencies into your strategy.

Have contingency plans. No matter how much time and thought you put into developing a detailed plan, you must also plan for when your plan doesn’t come to fruition. For example, say you want to transition out of academia and into industry. You do extensive research to identify 10-15 companies where you would like to work, you transform your CV into an industry-friendly resume, you network, you apply for jobs, you do informational interviews, and still you are not able to land a job in the timeframe you outlined in your original plan. You must be flexible, and you must build that flexibility as well as contingencies into your strategy. So if you don’t get a particular job for which you aim, you can expand your search parameters, and determine what else interests you, or research what additional skills and expertise is needed to get back on track.

One of your objectives should be to leave your current situation in a professional manner...

Don’t burn bridges. Even if you want to change course because you are in a toxic situation and your boss is a lunatic, remember that the world of science is tiny and the world of your specialization is at the nanoscale. One of your objectives should be to leave your current situation (as best as possible) in a professional manner with a glowing letter of recommendation and a reference who will only say good things about you. Even if this is not possible, you should seek to make your change in a very cordial way, remembering that your reputation is your most important asset and that every move you make can possibly be perceived incorrectly. So be a Lady or a Gentleman when you make your change and stay professional. Your next change – in another 10-15 years or less – may put you face-to-face with your current supervisor and colleagues and there’s no sense burning bridges.