

Coping With the Stress of Layoff and Unemployment

When a person's job ends involuntarily due to budget cuts it is normal to feel a sense of loss and the need to take some time to begin to heal. At least temporarily, you may have lost many things important to you including your daily work; your work associations; a structure for your days; financial security and status, etc. Even though the job loss is due to budget cuts and is not your fault, it is common to feel some loss of self esteem, and think that somehow you have failed. It can be hard to tell your friends and family.

Loss and the Grieving Process

Loss triggers a grieving process that may include the stages of shock and denial, anger, resistance, sadness, and finally, acceptance:

Shock and denial: Even though you may have known for some time that the job would end, it is still a shock when you get the actual message. It takes some time to absorb the reality of such news.

Anger: You may feel anger toward yourself, your employer and even your family. Thoughts like "How could they do this to me?" or "Why did I work so hard for them." Such thoughts and feelings are a normal part of the grief process.

Resistance: Sometimes you may find yourself resisting the inevitability of the layoff, e.g. "If I offer to reduce my hours or cut my pay, they will take me back." In time these thoughts will fade as you incorporate the reality of your situation in your life.

Sadness: It is normal to experience feelings of sadness and to want to withdraw after a job loss. However, if your job search is extended or you have other predisposing factors, you may become vulnerable to clinical depression. Getting professional help is critical as depression can interfere with your energy and effectiveness in finding a job.

Acceptance: Finally, we all work through loss and grief in our own way, come to accept what has happened, and move on. You may cycle back and forth between stages. Typically you will have good days and bad days as if you are on an emotional roller coaster. Be patient with yourself and the process. Eventually things will even out

Ways to Manage the Stress of Job Loss

Give yourself time to adjust. Allow yourself some time to absorb what has happened, deal with the initial emotional reactions of yourself and significant others. Be open to support from and discussions with those you feel comfortable with at work.

Don't be ashamed. The one good thing about all the jobs that have been lost in the last decades is that there is very little if any stigma attached to losing your job due to economic factors. It is not a matter of personal failure to lose one's job due to cutbacks.

Tell your family and friends as soon as possible. By opening up to those who care about you, you will immediately gain support from the most important people in your life. They may also be a source of job information.

Keep communication open with your significant others. Spouses, partners and children are also affected by your job loss. Give them permission to talk about their reactions and concerns. Have a family meeting to discuss how the family will cope and get everyone's ideas. Explain the economic forces that led to the job loss. Reassure children that the family will work together to get through this time.

Think of the job loss as a temporary setback. The way we “frame” what happens to us influences how we cope and move forward. Success in any endeavor depends on how one views setbacks in life. This is a challenge to deal with, not a failure or the “end of the world.” Avoid comparing yourself with others who have lost their job – everyone deals with it differently. Think positively, e.g. “I can handle this one step at a time.”

Join a job seeker's support group. No one can understand what you are going through better than your peers. Often you can share thoughts and feelings in a support group that you cannot share elsewhere. You will also get good advice and decrease any sense of isolation.

Use every community and networking resource available. Now is not the time to try to go it alone. Reach out and use everything that is offered to you by UW-Madison and in the community. A crisis like this gives you the opportunity and permission to get help.

Share your feelings with trusted family and friends. It may help you channel your energy into actions and stay motivated. Keeping a written journal of how you feel and what is happening can be another way to release your feelings, gain perspective, etc.

Deal with your fears directly. One good way to reduce your anxiety is to clarify what you are most afraid of and begin to work on a plan to address the fear, e.g. that you will never find another job. To paraphrase the famous statement – the biggest thing we have to fear is fear itself – and the way it can paralyze us and pulls us down.

Avoid negative people and ways of thinking. Spend time with people who are confident in you and your future and who have worked through their own crises in a positive manner. Talk to those who have constructive ideas and advice.

Do what you can and accept what you cannot change. Remember the serenity prayer – “Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Despite all your hard work in searching for a job, many other factors will also determine when you find work.

Take care of your health. Sleep, exercise, relaxation and good nutrition are more important than ever during the stress of unemployment. Use the extra time to set up that exercise program you never had time for when you were working so hard. Avoid the use of drugs and alcohol to deal with stress. Take scheduled breaks from your job search and allow time for fun.

Get professional help, when needed. If you feel depressed, become paralyzed by anxiety or your sleep is consistently disturbed and these do not improve over time seek the help of a mental health professional. Unemployment can also lead to financial and relationship strains at home. It may be helpful to connect with budgeting, parenting and/or couples counseling to address such issues.

Adapted from the Dartmouth College Faculty/Employee Assistance Program