



Coping with Job Loss

In today's economy, lay offs, job loss, restructuring and downsizing have all become commonplace terms. Men, women, blue-collar, white-collar, part-timers, full-timers, contract workers, long-service workers are all facing potential pink slips.

However, the stigma associated with losing a job has vanished. Hard-working, well-educated, successful individuals are among the casualties in workplace reductions. Losing your job today is no longer an indication of the quality of your work or behaviour. But that stigma is still internal, especially after 3 months have gone by and you still have not found a job. The first few weeks may feel like a holiday, but after several months of searching for a job without results, the depression sinks in.

"Very competent people begin feeling incompetent," says MOSAIC Counsellor, Pam Mank. "Diminished self-esteem is a central problem in job loss."

Pam compares the feelings associated with job loss to those experienced when grieving. "It is like a death – the death of your career – and you are not prepared for this loss."

Job loss also has a powerful impact on family, friends and co-workers. The change in family roles is a major upheaval for families facing job loss. Family roles and relationships get turned around. This is a real jolt especially for men who are used to supporting their families.

"There can also be a lot of resentment from the partner who has to get up and go to work in the morning," adds Pam, and the perception, whether true or not, that the person who has been laid off is not trying hard enough to find another job. As well, there may be feelings of jealousy towards co-workers who still have two-income families and are planning their summer holidays, entertainment and activities that you can no longer afford."

Children are also angry at the loss of their parent's job. They may be angry at the institution for what they did to the parent or simply at the lack of income and opportunities. The family may have to move in order to adjust to their new financial circumstances, leaving their children's neighbourhood, school and friends behind.

Physical health problems can also result from the stress of job loss, including sleep disturbances, depression, hypertension, fatigue and gastro-intestinal difficulties. "Some physical health problems are unavoidable," says Pam "You can't expect not to lose any sleep over this. It is a normal reaction."

But, there are things you can do to counter the physical and emotional effects of job loss.

- Take time out for exercise. The chemicals generated by exercise can counter those that cause depression.
- Use job loss as an opportunity for a lifestyle adjustment, like just being able to take time to get out for a walk.
- Develop other areas of interest and realize that your identity is not just what you do for a living. Find balance in your life. Job loss can provide an opportune time to rebalance your life.
- Keep talking about it. Isolation can be a killer. Expand your network and social contacts. Research shows that secondary contacts have provided the most support and help to those facing job loss. The more people you tell, the more opportunities there will be. You will find how much caring there is in the community and just how much people are willing to help.
- Tell everyone you encounter that you're looking for work. "It's not that you can't find a job. It's more positive to say you are looking than you can't find work," says Pam.
- Develop potential comforters other than your spouse. Your partner can't always be listening or be there for you or say what you need to hear. Don't be embarrassed to talk to friends who are working.
- Get people together who have experienced job loss. Join a support group. It provides an opportunity to share experiences, reduces isolation and improves morale. Don't be afraid to obtain professional help through counselling or career counselling.
- Get up and go every day. Even if you have nowhere to go, get yourself up and get dressed and go somewhere. At the same time, it is equally important at the end of the day, to leave that job of finding a job behind and take time for play.
- Volunteer. Volunteering provides contacts, the feeling of being needed and of being successful, and you get praise.
- Dare to entertain something new and outrageous. Open a window on the other side of the house. Ask yourself if you could do anything, what would you do? Look to your passions, your interests. Look at the possibility of doing something completely different whether it be the type of job or the location of the job.
- Develop a survivor approach, rather than a victim approach. Make an attitude shift from victim to agent in your life and you'll have a feeling of being more in control.
- Make a budget that includes your have to haves and nice to haves (including groceries). Look at ways to cut-back and ways to earn extra money, like having a garage sale.

Tips for Employers

While laying off staff is a difficult task for employers, there are ways to make it easier.

- Have things written down for the person losing their job, like information about their options, ways the company can help, or the availability of Xerox machines for laid off employees' resumes. "People are in shock when they receive the news at work," says Pam. "It is best to have everything written down, rather than to expect them to remember any verbal directives."
- Provide support programs like career counselling.
- Provide a support group for people who have to do the axing. "It's terrible news to tell people you really care about that they no longer have a job," says Pam. "It is best to strategize about how it is going to be done, and to lay off staff in a co-ordinated, humane fashion so that all employees get the same message."
- Be upfront. Communication is vital. Employers should let their staff know where they are at and help them to coordinate a plan.
- Allow staff being laid off to have some control. "Give employees options," says Pam, "even if it is a choice between two bad options. Do you want to go back to your office now with someone or come back in on the weekend to collect your things? Would you prefer to finish in two weeks or today?"
- Even upon return to work, the feeling of security once felt has vanished. "Hopefully," says Pam, "people can use this time as a tool to remember to keep balance in their lives and to learn from the healthy lifestyle changes they adopted while unemployed."



- Try to see this part of your life as transitional, a temporary situation that requires some adjustments.
- Plan for impending lay offs and cutbacks. Take control. If cutbacks are looming at your workplace, morale can be low as people fear the loss of their job. Take back some control by creating balance in your life. Recognize that you are not just what you do for a living and prepare for Plan B. Get career counselling, prepare a resume, take a course while you still have a job. Use this time while you are feeling your best, to mobilize your resources.
- Keep work a positive experience, it is important to keep doing the rituals you've always done and to celebrate even during times of crisis. Or create some new rituals that are a symbol of a new beginning.

Those who survive in today's workplace develop traits including creativity, perseverance, belief in self, optimism, a willingness to change and be flexible. They see themselves as an agent, not a victim even though some circumstances can seem victimizing. They see they have choices. They look forward, not backward.

Suggestions for Family, Friends and Co-Workers Following Lay-off Notices

- Listen carefully to the person who has received bad news.
- Spend time with the affected person.
- Offer your assistance and listening ear.
- Reassure the person that he/she is safe and normal and that what happened is no reflection of their personal worth.
- Help the person with routine tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family.
- Allow the person some private time.
- Try to understand that the person must grieve and don't take their anger (or other feelings) personally.
- Tell the person who has received bad news that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them as they go through this period of enormous transition.
- Call for help or support as soon as you feel it's needed.
- Don't stop calling and when you do call, be prepared to listen.
- Don't keep asking *have you found a job yet?*, you are just asking for a negative response.
- Don't just focus on the unemployment. Remember that they are still multi-dimensional people with more in their life than just work.
- Do something nurturing, something luxurious. Buy them the tea they enjoy, but can no longer afford. Make a casserole to take over for dinner. Take them out for lunch, or on a picnic in the park.
- Write them a note. Tell them they are missed by their co-workers and that they are valued.

There are some danger signs for family and friends to watch for. If after two weeks, they are not getting out of bed, getting dressed, eating properly, if they are not searching for a job, if they are over-medicating, over-computing, over-involved in anything, even if it is something positive, you should be concerned.

