

## **Coping with unexpected job loss**

(Karen Kelly, EdD, RN, CNAA-BC)

### **Reacting to job loss**

When you first lose your job unexpectedly, you experience shock and disbelief, accompanied or followed by anger. Efforts to bargain to get your job back aren't successful. Then, the sadness and sense of loss set in. These stages of grief are normal, but they are stages: Don't get stuck in a morass of sadness. Cry, soak in a bubble bath, take a long walk, dine with friends, and seek support from family and friends. But don't languish in your grief.

Unexpected job loss can affect every aspect of your life. The effects may include depression, anxiety, marital and family discord, weight gain, weight loss, eating problems, sleep loss, fatigue, head-aches and other symptoms of illness or stress, low self-esteem, and anger—lots of anger. Feeling anxious is normal. Suddenly, you have no income, but the bills still need to be paid. Your daily routine no longer includes going to work. Your life has a hole in the middle of it. You also may experience a sudden loss of professional identity and status. A loss of income doesn't just leave you wondering how you will pay the bills. Income is an element of your professional status. Your professional identity may also suffer if your professional network suddenly grows smaller, as some former colleagues withdraw. They may avoid you because they're embarrassed that they are still employed. They may have an irrational fear that socializing with you can endanger their own jobs. Or they just may not know what to say to you, much like people who don't know what to say when approaching someone who has lost a loved one. Telling your colleagues, especially nursing colleagues who work in other organizations, can be awkward. To avoid the awkwardness, try sending e-mails to those in your network. Doing so may even lead to a job tip.

### **Dealing with job loss**

When you suddenly lose your job, you have two choices: You can cope with it, or you can spend your time feeling sorry for yourself. Coping isn't easy, but it pays off. As the survivor of two unexpected job losses, I know the benefits of coping and moving on.

Job loss is a crisis, and families in crisis often need help. Short-term counseling may be an excellent investment in the well-being of your family. Children, even teens and college-age children, may need assurance that eventually life will be normal again. A spouse may be incredibly supportive or unable to cope. Marriages and other relationships can come apart because of the stress of job loss. Couples counseling may help maintain a relationship through this crisis.

Relocation is typically an issue for executive-level nurses, but nurses who live in rural areas or small communities may face the question of relocation, too. Relocation, even under the best of circumstances, causes stress. Relocation forced by job loss, especially for families with children, can cause extraordinary stress. Children will need time and maybe counseling to adjust. And a spouse may also need to find a job in the new location, which complicates the process and increases stress.

To help ease your stress, try exercise: It's a great stress-buster. Walk, swim, run, ride a bike, play tennis or golf, or go to the gym. Music can also relieve stress. Listen to music that's soothing or energizing. Resist the urge to deal with stress by overeating.

## **Looking for another job**

Don't sit and wait for the phone to ring with invitations from former colleagues and others. Call them; e-mail them. Get together for lunch or dinner. If job loss has caused immediate financial problems, limit yourself to coffee with friends and former colleagues.

Start your job hunt immediately. You can take a day or two off before starting your search, but don't let this period stretch into days or weeks of inactivity. If your severance package includes outplacement services, use them. Typically, this benefit is provided to nurse executives, not managers and staff nurses.

Reassess your professional goals. Ask yourself if you need to go back to school to prepare for a position you've always wanted. Consider where you want to be in 1, 2, and 3 years and start planning your path.

Plan to spend several hours each day on your job hunt. Consider this your temporary job. Use reputable websites to hunt for jobs. Various professional organizations, including the American Nurses Association and many state nurses associations, offer job boards on their websites. Let people know you're looking for a new job. If you've ever been contacted by a recruiter, call him or her to announce your job search.

E-mail colleagues to ask for any tips they may have. Use social activities with friends and colleagues as professional networking opportunities. Ask several former colleagues to serve as job references.

## **Starting a new chapter**

When you don't have a job, receiving a job offer can seem wonderful. But be wary of accepting the first job offered to you. If it's not a good fit for you, you may find yourself in the same situation in the near future: unemployed and looking for a job. Make sure the job you accept is a job you would accept if you were still employed. Avoid the temptation to find "any port in a storm." When you do accept a new position that's right for you, celebrate with family and friends. Close the chapter on job loss, and begin a new chapter in your life.

### **Selected references**

- Kelly K. Coping with unexpected job loss: personal and professional considerations. *Voice of Nursing Leadership*. 2006;4(4):6-7,12.
- Maurier WL, Northcott HC. Job uncertainty and health status for nurses during restructuring of health care in Alberta. *West J Nurs Res*. 2000;22:623-641.
- Sportsman S. So, you've been downsized. *Am J Nurs*. 1999;99(2):24F-24G.
- Vinokour AD, Schul Y. The web of coping resources and pathways to re-employment following a job loss. *J Occup Health Psychol*. 2002;7(1):68-83.

Karen Kelly is an Associate Professor in the School of Nursing at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.