

Emotional Recovery From Job Loss

(By Karen Berney)

http://health.discovery.com/centers/mental/articles/job_loss/job_loss.html

When Louise B. walked into her office and couldn't log onto to her computer, she just knew that something bad was about to happen. Moments later her boss told her that post-Sept. 11 economic events had wiped out her project. She was being laid off.

But Louise didn't hear the actual words. "My heart was pumping fast. Tears were starting to well up. A chorus was playing in my head — 'What am I going to do now?' I remember hearing myself pleading for "just one more month so I could find a job."

It was her second layoff in a year and she thought she knew what to expect. "I knew I was going to worry constantly about money. I was ready for my self-esteem to crash through a trapdoor. But I didn't expect to be physically sidelined."

During her first week of joblessness, Louise lost six pounds. She could barely get out of bed to interact with her children. She slept 12 hours a night, but was still exhausted. This ordinarily tough-as-nails, separated mother of three was in the throes of a mild depression.

Job Loss: More Than a Financial Issue

When a person is faced with such trauma as job loss, such physical symptoms are not uncommon. Studies have shown that trauma puts you at a higher risk for depression, anxiety, problems with drugs and alcohol, and illness, says Al Siebert, Ph.D., author of *The Survivor Personality* and a leader of workshops for survivors. Siebert has devoted his career to investigating why some people emerge stronger and better from the kinds of adversities that crush others.

What truly threatens one's health is the tendency to "somaticize" feelings, says Siebert. This happens when the anxiety and stress brought on by devastation are expressed through the body. Headaches, hypertension and ulcers are the usual signs.

Louise's depression did not persist. She was able to resume normal day-to-day activities within weeks and found a new job within months. "I think I always knew I would rebound," she says, "but I had to hit bottom before I could rise to the surface."

Emotional Resilience

Louise demonstrated the attributes of what Siebert calls "emotional resiliency." Initially, she dwelled on her difficulties and became too overwhelmed to function. But she bounced back, regaining enough emotional balance to commit to solving her problems.

When you lose a job, you're told to update your resume, network like heck and redo your budget. But before you can get "business like" about your job search, you have to deal with the emotional challenge of job loss, asserts Siebert. He advises taking the following steps to work through the emotions of job loss:

- Write about how you feel. In a study conducted by researchers Stephanie Spera, Eric Buhrfiend and James Pennebaker in 1994, men who had lost their jobs found work significantly faster if they wrote about the experience for 30 minutes a day for five consecutive days. Translating upsetting experiences into language not only diffuses intense emotions, but changes the way you view experiences, Siebert says. It helps you develop perspective on your motives, thoughts, feelings and reactions.

- Recapture your self-esteem. Many people succumb to old prejudices about the unemployed when they are laid off. They think, "There must be something wrong with me. I can't hold a job." Such attitudes chip away at your self-esteem, says Siebert. To rebuild self-confidence, he suggests making a list of everything you do well and like about yourself. Describe successful assignments or projects. He advises asking co-workers and managers for letters of appreciation about how great it was to work with you. This collection of samples, credentials and endorsements will help you develop an appreciation for your experience and skills.
- Find the lessons in your loss. Siebert relays this anecdote about bicycle racer Lance Armstrong: When asked whether he'd choose to have cancer or win the Tour de France, the athlete supposedly said he'd take cancer because of what it has taught him about the value of life. "No matter how bad their circumstances, the best survivors ask: 'What can I learn from what has happened to me?'" says Siebert. In the case of job loss, the lesson often has to do with evaluating and restructuring career priorities.
- Practice empathy for difficult situations and people. Why is this important? "The ability to understand how others act, think and live is a high-level skill," says Siebert. Moreover, it's a skill that will help you gain employment. "No one is going to hire you because you need a job," adds Siebert. You are going to get that offer because the employer believes you can solve his problems, and the ability to empathize makes you more aware of and sensitive to the problems of others. Once you have recovered from the emotional aspects of job loss, you can direct your energy to searching for work. When you go on interviews, you'll be more relaxed, in control and self-confident.

Louise didn't work out her emotions about her layoff on paper. But she did reach out to friends, family and colleagues to regain confidence and reassess her strengths, weaknesses and desires.

"It was particularly hard when employers asked me about being laid off," she says. "I said: 'It was distressful, but it also propelled me to acquire new skills and broaden my horizons.'"