

Coping With Stress During a Job Loss¹

Heidi Liss Radunovich²

As our society is changing, more and more people are likely to experience a job loss at some time in their career. In the past, there was a greater sense of loyalty between companies and workers, such that many workers would join a company with the expectation that they would remain there for their entire careers; in turn, companies valued such long-time employees. However, over time it has become much more common for companies to have periodic employee layoffs in which even long-time employees are vulnerable. As a result, most workers today expect to remain at a company for a period, but anticipate changing jobs in order to advance their careers or ensure job continuity.

Although job loss is more common today than in times past, unexpected job loss can still be a shocking, frightening, and certainly stressful experience. Many experts suggest that the emotional reaction to a sudden layoff or job loss is similar to what is experienced with other significant losses, such as death. Many people will experience some or all of the following stages:

- Shock and denial: After initially hearing the news, it is common for people to be incredibly shocked by it, even if it was somewhat expected. It can be difficult to comprehend fully what has happened, and some people may need some time
- Anger: After the initial shock is over, people frequently experience anger towards the company or others perceived to be at fault. People also may experience anger towards themselves for being in this situation, anger towards family and friends, and even anger towards other co-workers who did not lose their jobs.
- Resistance: Later in the process, people may engage in resistance to the idea of the job loss, and may believe that there are things that they can do to change the situation. They may think that doing something such as taking a pay cut or agreeing to work fewer hours will help them keep their jobs. In most cases, this is not a viable option.
- Sadness: Once the reality of the situation has truly set in, people often feel very sad and hurt.
- Acceptance: Eventually, people learn to accept the situation and move on.

1. This document is FCS5265, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date: August 2008. Visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Heidi Liss Radunovich, assistant professor, Family, Youth and Community Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.

It is important to remember that not all people will experience all stages, not all stages will occur in the order listed, and many who experience job loss will go back and forth among the stages before finally reaching acceptance. However, if you do experience feelings associated with these stages, keep in mind that this is normal, that you can work through these feelings and feel better. Some people may move through these stages more quickly than others may, and this is normal, too. However, anyone having great difficulty with the experience, or who is stuck in a certain phase, may need professional help in order to move on.

Not surprisingly, studies show that people become more likely to experience depression and anxiety after a job loss. However, people are more surprised to learn that the stress of job loss or even the threat of job loss can cause an increase in health problems. Because health problems are more likely when under stress, it is especially important that people try to take good care of themselves during this time, even if they don't really feel like doing this. Here are some ways to take care of yourself during the stress of a job loss:

- **Eating right:** Make sure you are eating enough, and that most of the foods you are eating are healthy. Sometimes people will want to indulge in junk food when they are feeling sad, and although a little bit of this may be okay, too much can be bad for your health. In addition, consuming too much alcohol or caffeine can lead to serious health problems. Finally, if you think your diet does not contain enough nutrients, you may want to consider taking a multi-vitamin or other vitamin supplement in order to stay healthy. Check with your doctor or a licensed nutritionist for advice on proper diet and nutritional supplements.
- **Sleep:** Stress often disrupts sleep patterns. Under severe stress, some people may want to sleep constantly, while others may find it difficult to sleep due to worries about what the future holds. However, research suggests that sleep is important in helping us process information and function effectively, so if possible try to get at least 7–8 hours of sleep per night. If you find you are requiring much more

sleep than that per night over a long period of time, or if you are unable to get enough sleep, you should speak with your doctor about what can be done to help you.

- **Exercise:** Research suggests that physical exercise can help people deal with stress, and there is evidence that exercise can affect brain functioning so that people feel better after exercising. If you were already exercising prior to the job loss, this is good and you should continue with your regimen even if you don't always feel like it. For those who are not accustomed to exercise, start slowly, and consult with your doctor before engaging in any new program of exercise. Remember that exercise does not have to be expensive: you can go walking with friends or family, or even do exercises at home using a video tape or instructions from a book or the Internet.
- **Emotional support:** Especially during times of stress, it can be very helpful to have a strong network of people that you can turn to for emotional support. After a job loss, it may seem as though you will never find another job, or you may feel bad about yourself, but having the support of family members and friends can help you gain and maintain perspective. Seek out positive people who can help you identify good strategies, who encourage your efforts, and who remind you that this is a temporary setback. This can help you weather this difficult time. Some also find it helpful to keep a journal in order to let out some of the thoughts and feelings they are having. If there's one in your area, you may even want to consider joining a job seeker's support group. Finally, don't forget about professional contacts. Maintaining these relationships may not only help you to feel good, but may also lead to new job opportunities.
- **Time for yourself:** Taking time out for yourself to do something enjoyable will help relieve stress, and help keep your spirits up. This might include hobbies such as knitting, gardening, cooking, sports, art, or other fun activities. However, any activity that you enjoy, such as listening to music, reading, or watching a favorite television program can be beneficial. It

helps to establish a routine in which you engage in your own enjoyment every day, even if it is only for 5–10 minutes. Taking time out for yourself will help you to cope during this stressful time.

- **Keeping up a positive attitude:** How we think about things affects how well we cope with the situation. One thing that can help us in keeping up a positive attitude is remembering that it is natural to be sad or angry at times, and it is important not to judge our feelings. That doesn't mean that we can't try to take on more positive thoughts, such as reminding ourselves that this is a temporary problem, that we have gotten through tough times before, that we have options, that there are people who care about us, and that this, too, shall pass. For those who are comfortable with spirituality, seeking solace in religious beliefs or in meditation can be helpful. Some people even find comfort in thinking about the bad things they are leaving behind in their old job. Even though you may not always be able to think positively, practicing doing this as much as you can will help you manage the stress you are experiencing.

Sometimes the stress associated with a job loss is just too much for us to cope with alone. Those who continue to struggle emotionally for a long time after a job loss should seek professional help. Counselors or psychotherapists may be able to help you cope with the stress. You may want to speak with your doctor about your stress in order to get a referral to a specialist, or to discuss medications that can temporarily help you cope with the difficult emotions.

Finally, research suggests that the financial strain associated with job loss can be the cause of additional stress, possibly leading to depression or other mental health problems and even problems with physical health. Therefore, whenever possible, it is good to keep stress levels related to financial strain at bay. Taking a proactive approach to financial planning can help you to retain a sense of control, and reduce financial strain. For example, knowing what your monthly expenses look like can help you to determine the impact of job loss. Setting aside

whatever funds you can for a rainy day or emergency fund can also help people to minimize the financial impact. Finding ways to reduce your expenses may also be helpful to reduce the stress that often accompanies a drop in income. For more information on financial planning and dealing with financial difficulties during a job loss see:

- Show me the Money Lesson One: Your Financial Action Plan
- Show me the Money Lesson Two Record Keeping: What to Keep, What to Discard
- Leaks in Spending
- Cutting Costs to Live Within Your Income.

References

- Boelter, L.A., & LeFebvre, J.E. (2006). *Managing Between Jobs: Taking care of yourself*. Madison, WI: Cooperative Extension Publishing, University of Wisconsin – Extension.
- Career Management Program, *How to Manage Stress During a Job Loss Situation*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 15, 2008 from Johns Hopkins University, Human Resources Career Management Program site:
<http://hrnt.jhu.edu/cmp/webPDFs/ManagingStress.pdf?SMSESSION=NO>
- Faculty & Staff Services A-Z: Coping with the Stress of Layoff and Unemployment. (n.d.). Retrieved May 15, 2008 from University of California, Berkeley University Health Services site:
<http://www.uhs.berkeley.edu/FacStaff/care/layoffandunemployment.shtml>
- Ferrie, J.E., Shipley, M.J., Marmot, M.G., Martikainen, P., Stansfeld, S.A., & Smith, G.D. (2001). Job insecurity in white-collar workers: Toward an explanation of associations with health. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 6(1), 26-42.
- Price, R.H., Choi, J.N., & Vinokur, A.D. (2002). Links in the chain of adversity following job loss: How financial strain and loss of personal control lead

to depression, impaired functioning, and poor health.
Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 7(4),
302-312.

Rudisill, J.R., & Edwards, J.M. (2002). Coping
with job transitions. Consulting Psychology Journal:
Practice and Research, 54(1), 55-64.

Sapolsky, R.M. (2004). Why zebras don't get
ulcers. New York: Henry Holt and Company.