

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 also 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 will take some time to absorb the reality of the news.

Anger: You may feel anger toward yourself, your employer and even your family. Some common thoughts might be "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 you will fully accept the reality of your situation.

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 at work.

Don't be ashamed. The one good thing about all the jobs that have been lost in the last decade 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 open communication 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.