

MANAGING THE STRESS OF A JOB LOSS

Source: Employee Assistance Program, Texas A&M AgriLife

Impact of a Job Loss

The loss of a job can be one of the most stressful events that a person may experience. In fact, the loss of a job is included within the top 10 list of stressful events. A job provides more than simply just a paycheck. A job also provides a sense of identity, self-confidence, respect, and stability. Thus, the loss of a job creates an incredible change in your life impacting financial stability, family relationships and daily routines.

When undergoing this change, it is natural to feel a wide range of emotions including anger, fear, and depression. The feeling of shock is common even when the job loss was suspected. You may also feel overwhelmed or a sense that everything is out of control. It is important to try and not panic or respond in ways that could cause regret later or potentially impact your ability to find a job elsewhere.

One of the best ways to deal with these feelings is to gain some sense of control over the situation. For instance – take time to remind yourself of a time where you were met with challenges but successfully resolved the situation.

A next step is to set time aside to think about the current situation and to begin to generate a list of questions/concerns that will need to be investigated or discussed with your spouse and family. A spouse will have questions concerning the details of the job loss, current insurance coverage, budget needs, and plans for finding a new job. Children should also be informed of the situation. They do not need to know all of the specifics, but it is okay to let them know that the job loss occurred and to reinforce that you will continue to care for them.

Normal Reactions to Stress

After the initial shock of the loss of your job has begun to wear off, it is important to watch for ongoing signs of stress. Stress can affect you emotionally, physically, and mentally.

Normal stress reactions to the loss of a job include:

Emotional Responses

- Shock or numbness
- Anger, irritability
- Fear, anxiety
- Depression, sadness, helplessness, loneliness
- Guilt
- Frustration

Physical Responses

- Change in sleep patterns – sleeping too little or too much
- Change in appetite – eating too much or too little
- Headaches
- Muscle tension
- Fatigue
- Increased sweating

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Mental Responses

- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Forgetfulness

Behavioral Responses

- Withdrawing from others
- Crying
- Decreased energy/ambition
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Conflicts with others

The good news is that stress itself can be a positive motivator giving energy for action to network with others and to take steps to look for a new job. Stress, however, can be negative if it is ignored or denied. Stress does not always just disappear on its own. Your stress responses may continue to exist and even seem to develop a life of their own if they are not managed.

Stress Management Tips

The key to stress management is to identify signs of stress as soon as possible and make positive changes to help cope/manage the stress.

Stress Management Techniques include:

Mental Tips:

- Maintain perspective about the situation – remember past successful challenges
- Complete small projects around the house – this will provide a sense of accomplishment
- Keep a positive outlook – look for the silver lining – this is a time to try new things and set new priorities
- Use positive language and names for tasks – refer to problems as “challenges”
- Be flexible and adaptable – expect change to continue
- Organize – set priorities – focus on the present
- Clarify your values and life goals

Relationship tips

- Talk to friends and family – share thoughts and feelings – hold regular family meetings to discuss the job search, financial plans, and on going feelings
- Find support from others who have been, or are in, a similar situation
- Be assertive
- Network
- Use spiritual tools
- Seek professional help from a doctor or mental health professional if needed

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Diversions (things you like to do for fun)

- Listen to or play music
- Get away for the day or weekend
- Focus on hobbies
- Read
- Watch movies
- Play with children
- Have fun – play – laugh – it is okay to have fun while in transition
- Balance job search activities with other fun activities

Physical tips

- Eat well
- Exercise
- Get enough rest
- Avoid the misuse of alcohol and drugs

Often the signs and symptoms of stress will grow less intense and disappear as stress management tools are used and time goes by. However, stress related to the loss of a job can be ongoing. Managing your stress reaction over time is important since stress that is not managed can have a negative impact such as health problems, family, marital problems, decreased ability to find a new job due to lack of motivation or ability to focus, and increased changes of anxiety or depression.

If the signs of stress do not decrease with regular stress management techniques, and you continue to struggle with this change, you may want to contact the Employee Assistance Program at (979) 845-3711.

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Grief, Anger and Job Loss

For most people, a job plays a key role in their lives beyond providing a paycheck. A job provides a sense of belonging, security, and most importantly, a sense of identity. Job loss brings with it a loss of income, position, and in many cases, a loss of identity. It can be a devastating event both emotionally and financially for an employee who is told that their job will be terminated. Grieving over the loss of a job is only natural, especially when losing the job is not the person's fault. The stages and symptoms of grief over a job loss are similar to those experienced by people who lose a friend or family member through death. Remember, it is **normal** to grieve when a person experiences the loss of a job.

The consequences of job loss are real and can be quite debilitating. Experts list job loss as one of the three most traumatic events in a person's life – right behind the death of a loved one and divorce. There are two main aspects to job loss: the practical and the emotional. The practical aspects of losing a job have to do with the reality of the loss of income and benefits until another job can be found. Emotionally, the consequences of losing a job are just as real. Self-image and worth can be damaged and fears about the future and the ability to meet financial obligations can seem overwhelming. People experiencing job loss grief often find themselves feeling defeated, at odds with other family members on a more frequent basis, and get sick more frequently. Increased use of drugs and/or alcohol as a means to cope with job loss grief should also be closely monitored.

Grief includes feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that exist over a period of time. Everyone is affected . . . spouse, children, and other family members. A person may move back and forth between the different stages of grief, experiencing waves of sadness, anger and fear. Following are the three stages of grief and common grief reactions for each:

1. Initial Shock & Denial

- shock/disbelief
- denial
- withdrawal
- feeling stunned
- “if only” scenarios
- forgetfulness/loss of memory
- poor concentration
- feelings of anxiety, sadness, depression
- increased potential for use of alcohol and/or drugs to “numb the pain”
- hopelessness
- lack of ability to cope
- blaming others
- confusion
- intensification of pre-existing life problems

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2. Anger/Sadness

- powerlessness
- helplessness
- sense of injustice/betrayal
- anger
- bitterness
- resentment
- displaced anger directed toward spouse/children
- blaming oneself
- pain
- fear
- guilt
- shame
- depression

3. Acceptance/Resolution

- coming to terms with negative feelings
- taking better care of oneself through dieting, exercising, relaxing and being with friends
- exploring career options
- searching for employment
- end point after working through the above phases/feelings

What should a person do to overcome the feelings of hopelessness and desperation that often accompany the loss of a job?

1. **Take time to grieve.** Grief is the healing process a person goes through after suffering a loss. Research has shown that individuals who have been laid off are usually in a state of crisis and, as with other types of crisis situations; time is needed to grieve the loss and readjust. Acknowledging grief is an important first step to recovering from the loss of a job.

Keeping a journal can also be an important part in the process of recovering from the loss of a job. Psychologist James Pennebaker had a group of unemployed people write down their feelings about being laid off for 20 minutes, five days in a row. He had a similar group of unemployed people write about their time schedule for their job search for 20 minutes, five days in a row. In the months that followed, more of the people who wrote about their emotions found employment. Afterwards, the group writing about their emotions said they wished someone had told them about what to do sooner. Writing can help you overcome any stress related to job loss and begin to heal.

2. **Exercise regularly.** Vigorous exercise on a regular basis can help to reduce stress levels. Exercise also helps people feel more relaxed and increases the ability to mentally focus.
3. **Follow a new (temporary) daily routine until another job is found.** Routines help to clear the mind, keep productivity high, and promote a feeling of usefulness. A daily routine might include some of the following: getting up early, contacting a number of potential employers each day, writing letters, making phone calls, getting

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some rest and exercise. Make finding a job a temporary job! The most important thing is to make constructive use of time.

4. **Form a support group with caring family members and friends.** Being around other people is an important part of the healing process and these people might also provide valuable leads on potential jobs. People who have difficulty expressing their feelings to friends and family members may benefit from short-term counseling or other professional help.
5. **Mount a job search.** Get organized by making a list of all available organizations, companies, and agencies in the area. Initial tasks might include revising your resume, making phone calls and writing letters of application.

Anger

Part of grieving the loss of a job is taking the time to adjust and to even feel angry and upset. Using anger in a positive manner will help a person who has lost a job deal with the event sooner than later and move forward with a job search. For instance, anger is often energizing; turn feelings of anger and frustration about losing a job into motivation to find a new one.

It is also not uncommon for people to take their anger about losing a job out on family and friends. It is important during this time to share these feelings with others. Sharing these angry feelings can help overcome strong emotions; many people have had similar experiences and will be able to sympathize and share coping strategies. It is also important to talk to family members about what is going on and to make sure children in the family know that they are not to blame for any negative feelings or sudden unhappiness at home.

While research has shown that anger over job loss is often directed outward, this is not always the case. Anger can turn inward and result in fatigue, anxiety and even depression. When we work hard to deny angry feelings, we often grow tired from the energy it takes to keep our anger under wraps.

While the degree of anger can vary, some people get “stuck” feeling bitter and resentful after losing a job and it may hinder their ability to mount an effective job search. Think through what has happened, grieve the loss (versus maintaining anger over the situation), examine any life lessons that can be taken from the experience, let it go, and get on with life.

Given the physical and mental costs of anger, it is important to find a positive way to deal with the anger, frustration and discouragement that follow the loss of a job. Regular exercise, journaling, taking time away from the situation and professional help are all methods to decrease anger and frustration.

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available as a resource to discuss feelings and reactions to a job loss. Contact the EAP at (979) 845-3711 to speak with an EAP counselor or schedule an appointment: <http://employees.tamu.edu/employees/worklife/assistance/default.aspx>
3608 E. 29th Street
Suite 101, Executive Plaza
Bryan, TX
Phone: 979-862-3711, Appointment scheduling: 979-845-3711
eap@tamu.edu

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I've Lost My Job – Now What Do I Do???

Adapted from *The Survivor Personality* by Al Siebert, Ph.D. and the U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

Losing a job through no fault of your own can be devastating. How do you find enough energy to mount a job search and present yourself in the best possible light? Here are some basic guidelines and resources to help you begin the task of finding a new job.

- Form a small support group and link up with others like yourself. Use the first few sessions to grieve the loss of your jobs; talk about what you liked about your job, what you'll miss, what you won't miss, your best experiences and what you will always be proud you accomplished. Hold brainstorming sessions about how to find other employment opportunities.
- Write a detailed description of what you do well and practice talking about your strengths and accomplishments. Describe specific projects or assignments that had special meaning to you. Describe your people skills and what equipment and software you know particularly well. This exercise is called "Creating a Portfolio," which is a collection of credentials, proficiencies and experiences that reflect your skills. See <http://amby.com/worksite/>, a website based out of Pittsburgh, PA that has many interesting topics about how to mount a job search.
- Make finding a job your temporary job. Research has shown that the one factor above all others that leads to getting hired is the number of potential employers contacted. Let people know that you are looking for employment opportunities. Job search options that might be available include:
 - personal contacts
 - school career placement offices
 - previous employers/supervisors
 - classified ads
 - internet networks and resources
 - state employment service offices
 - professional associations
 - community agencies
 - private employment agencies and career consultants

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The Job Interview

Adapted from the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

A job interview gives a potential employee the opportunity to showcase abilities and qualifications to an employer, so be well prepared! Here is a checklist that will help you survive the interview process.

Preparation

- Learn what you can about the organization (look them up on the web, talk to other people you know who work for the company)
- Have a specific job in mind
- Review your qualifications for the job you want
- Review your resume
- Be prepared to answer questions about yourself and your abilities (practice with friends or family members)
- Arrive before the scheduled time of your interview (don't make a bad first impression by arriving late for your interview)

Personal Appearance

- Be well groomed
- Dress appropriately
- Do not chew gum, smoke, or bring a drink into the interview with you

What to Bring to a Job Interview

- A good attitude!!!
- Resume
- List of current references (typically three and try to avoid using relatives)

Testing (if the employer gives one)

- Listen closely to the instructions
- Read each question carefully
- Ask questions if you don't understand a direction
- Write legibly and clearly
- Budget your time wisely and don't dwell on one question

The Interview

- Use good manners. Learn the name of your interviewer and shake hands when you meet
- Relax, (take several deep breaths if you become nervous) and answer each question concisely
- Use proper English and avoid slang
- Be cooperative and enthusiastic
- Have questions ready about the specific position and the organization
- Thank the interviewer when you leave and, as a follow up, in writing the day after the interview