

ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND THE JOB SEARCH



Job seekers navigating unemployment and an extended job search can find themselves in a bit of a Catch-22. Worn down by frustration and stress, many find themselves spiraling into depression, which will ultimately manifest itself in job-search performance — sleepless nights, lack of motivation, diminished interview skills and a bad attitude — and can make it even hard to gain employment. Staying mentally healthy on the job search is vital if you are to operate at your peak.

The stories below identify precisely what layoff survivors are likely to experience and solutions to combat the stress and anxiety that can lead to depression.

Read these four stories to help you stay healthy during your job search:

Your Layoff, Your Brain: How to Get Out of Your Own Way

To combat the stress and anxiety that come along with unemployment, follow these tips

Grace Barry did everything right. After being laid off from a high-level IT position at a government agency in December 2007, she got right to work at the job of finding a job.

"I didn't anticipate having a difficult time," said Barry. "I knew that looking for a job was a full-time job, but I'm very organized about it. I take advice. I went and rewrote my resume so that it was more achievement-based; I read the books. I scoured the Internet; and, at one time, I had more than 100 applications out there." Barry added that, through it all, she never stopped networking.

The result of doing "everything right" for about seven months? One interview.

Barry did receive an offer as a result of that July 2008 interview — but the job was in financial services, and the offer fell through when the industry collapsed.

Looking for a job after being involuntarily let go from a position is difficult under any circumstances. In today's economy — with a national unemployment rate that recently topped 8 percent — a job search can be prolonged, and the effects can be even more pronounced on your body, mind and spirit.

"It's a big challenge to your capacity to adapt, just like a prolonged illness is a challenge or going through war is a challenge," said Michael Jolkovski PhD, a psychologist and psychoanalyst in Falls Church, Va., and principal at Working Through, a consultancy focused on helping creative teams work effectively together.

When a person loses a job, he or she is likely to experience anger, stress, and feelings of anxiety and depression. Left unchecked, these feelings can become detrimental to a person's physical and mental health, hindering her ability to search effectively for a new job.

In short, our natural responses may work against us.

Anxiety triggers a sense of alertness In itself, anxiety isn't a bad thing. Indeed, it's a prime motivator when it comes to tackling challenges.

"People do have physiological changes when they get anxious — their fight-or-flight system gets going, and, biologically, through evolution, if we perceive a threat we need to fight it or run away or, in some cases, freeze and hope that it ignores us," said Kathryn J. Fraser, a psychiatrist and associate professor of psychiatry at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine in Albuquerque.

"Unfortunately, the way our culture is, we don't have people to fight or to run away from. We've got bigger, more nebulous things."

Fraser — who has been medical director of the Continuing Care Clinic at the UNM Psychiatric Center for seven years and whose just-completed first novel, "A Journey, a Reckoning and a Miracle," will be published in July — said physical responses to an involuntary job loss can include sleeplessness, tension leading to headaches and stomachaches, and panic attacks that generate myriad physical symptoms.

Anxiety symptoms, like heightened senses, might be useful to propel us in the short term, but they can lead to depression if experienced over longer periods, Fraser said.

"If people get more into depression it's partly because of what's called the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, abbreviated as HPA," she said. "It has to do with cortisol — that's a part of our endocrine system that gets going. This is very useful in short-term threatening situations, but with longer-term anxiety, like with losing a job, that kind of response predisposes people to depression."

This can lead to a destructive Catch-22.

"If [people are] anxious and depressed and can't sleep," said Fraser, "they might be less able to do the things they need to do to find another job or to at least keep their spirits high enough to feel good about other things that may be going on in their lives." External support should be sought if these symptoms worsen or extend over time, or if feelings of hopelessness set in.

"We all feel stress — but the shift ... to anxiety or depression typically comes when you start to experience feelings of hopelessness, and some of the things you used to enjoy you no longer enjoy," said Kevin Skinner, who has a Ph.D. in marriage and family therapy and is an author and radio-show host. "And so you shift gears from, 'I'm going to make it through this — I don't know the answer, but I'm going to make it through this,' to, 'I don't know if we're going to make it.'"

"You need to have some anxiety — we all have some anxiety," said Justin Tobin, a psychotherapist in private practice in downtown Chicago. "If we don't have any anxiety, then we'll never be able to meet any of our own goals. ... It's when we start to buy into the belief that there's only six months left — what if I don't find something? Those thoughts can push on the anxiety and make the anxiety uncontrollable."

Mass depression

Coping with the feelings that go along with a job loss is challenging under any circumstances, but, as the economy continues to flounder and the news seems to go from bad to worse each day, job seekers find themselves dealing with negative group-think and perhaps even a mass depression.

Jolkovski likened the current situation to the aftermath of 9/11. "The analogy I would make is, after 9/11, we all saw that film loop of that horrible, horrible fireball. After a while, we needed to turn off the TV — we'd seen that fireball enough."

Fraser took the notion a step further, saying that too much exposure to television and the Internet — regardless of the program — can have mental as well as physical consequences.

"I think it's important that people limit their time [watching] the TV," said Fraser. "There are actual studies that show that too much TV goes along with increased depression. And part of it is, physically, people are just sitting there, watching something, and our bodies were not meant to do that. Again, back to evolutionary psychology, we need to be out running around and doing physical exercise."

Time and again that regular exercise and eating right are key to maintaining the healthy mind and body that will be required for an arduous job search.

"We all sweat from anxiety," said Elizabeth Friedman, a clinical psychologist in New York. "It is way better to sweat from a good workout. There is all kinds of evidence that exercise releases all kinds of good stuff in your brain and makes you more positive."

Indeed, people will have to work hard to overcome the repeated rejection that can come with an extended job search.

"The mind has to change to the concept of, 'It's going to take me a while to find a job,' " said Skinner, 'It's not a matter of if, but a matter of when I get that new job. And until then, I'm going to be hitting up against a lot of rejection.' And we don't deal with rejection very well as human beings, especially when it has to do with our finances and being able to provide for our families."

"It's sort of like the entrepreneur's mentality, where people are doing something and the success is uncertain," he said. "Just like certain salespeople — if they get a 1 percent response rate, then they're doing well. They have to have the mentality to make 99 calls and say, 'Well, there's one more down,' instead of saying, 'Oh, I've been rejected 99 times.' "

Creative thinking

Job seekers would do well to employ some creative thinking. In today's market, your next job might not be the same as the one from which you were let go — in function, responsibility or pay. But that may have to be OK and, in some cases, can be a positive life change.

"Try and flip it around as an opportunity," Friedman said. "There are jobs out there — not as many, but there are jobs. You could find something a little different, and that's cool. Change is growth. For many of us, change can be a very scary thing. For people who are very successful, change is usually a very positive challenge and, potentially, a very exciting thing. To do a job that's a tiny bit different or even a lot different — but within your skill set in any case — that's kind of nice."

After her lone job offer fell through and nothing else "hit" despite her best efforts, Grace Barry decided it was time for something a lot different. She set out to build a consultancy of her own and began doing research and networking for the new business.

During that process — and completely out of left field — she was recruited by a person she had gone to for advice and was hired for a position at his company.

"[The position is] actually in business development, and I had only been on the engineering side, and it's certainly at quite a salary cut," said Barry of her new job. "But I'm working today, and I'm very, very happy to be working. ... You always hear, 'Keep networking, keep networking' — I never stopped networking. I never stopped doing what I was supposed to do. I did everything that I read about, everything I heard about. It was almost like an act of desperation got me someplace where I could interview for a job."

Setting expectations is key to maintaining a sense of hope. It may take a while, but your journey won't be exactly like Grace Barry's, or any one person's. It will be your own, and reminding yourself that you are the one in control of the situation can be the key to keeping your composure.

In small doses, anxiety is necessary fuel to drive achievement. But in a prolonged job search, the effects of stress can work against you. Here are some practical insights to gain control of your body's fight-or-flight mechanisms.

Stop Job Loss from Stealing Your Confidence and Your Identity

One big challenge a professional faces when he's lost his job is that he's also lost a big piece of his identity.

"Being out of work is a terrible feeling," said Elizabeth Friedman, PhD, a clinical psychologist in New York. "We identify at least part of our self with what we do. Hopefully it's not all of our self-definition, but it is a big part of it. So we lose our grounding, our footing, in certain ways. 'Who am I? Where am I going? What do I do tomorrow morning at 8:00? Do I get up? Do I stay in bed?' "

Staying in bed is not the right answer. In fact, sticking to a routine and applying control when and where you can is key.

"Take one day to feel terrible, and then get moving," Friedman said. "It's very important to keep basic routines. You can't suddenly be up all night long watching 'Law and Order.' Get up in the morning; take a shower. If you're a guy, shave; if you're a woman, do your hair. Send out a million e-mails, contact all of your friends."

A sense of identity loss can affect a person's relationships and family dynamics, as well.

"When you've lost a job, you start to question your own identity," said Kevin Skinner, who has a Ph.D. in marriage and family therapy and shares expert advice at MyExpertSolution.com. "Sometimes if it's an extended job loss, you begin to feel guilty, especially if it's affecting your family, and maybe your wife has to go back to work. You start to feel like, 'What's wrong with me?' And it's not about that." What it is about, said Skinner, is reaching out to others and focusing on realistic solutions. "The best thing we can do in these times is get additional support," he said. "You might have to turn to family for support. You might have to go live somewhere else — downgrade your home, downgrade your cars. The resilient people are going to say, 'I'm going to find a solution — I'm a person who finds solutions to problems.' "

Staying Healthy Through Troubled Times

Being let go from a job is difficult under any circumstances, but in today's economy, it can be even more stressful. Mental-health experts and people who have been through the job hunt themselves offer the following advice for maintaining your emotional and physical health during what can be a prolonged job search.

- * Exercise regularly.***
- * Eat a healthy diet.***
- * Maintain a regular schedule, especially when it comes to sleep.***
- * Stay away from anything that can dull your edge, such as alcohol.***
- * Don't try and go it alone. Connect regularly with other people, both in your professional and personal circles. If all of your connections were through your job, consider seeking out religious or community organizations.***
 - * Make yourself useful. Reaching out to others during this time is one way to help you feel valuable — and valued.***
 - * Limit your exposure to television and the Internet. Sitting passively while consuming bad news is detrimental in many ways.***
 - * Seek out free services in your community. Many people who have been working don't realize that there is a safety net out there, experts say — everything from the library to mental-health services.***
 - * There are many things you can't control right now, so focus on the things you can: how many resumes you send out, how many phone calls you make and so on.***
 - * Don't put your eggs in one basket. If you pin all of your hopes on one "perfect" job, you have to start all over again if you don't get it.***
 - * In fact, think outside the box. Your next job may not be the same — in function or in pay — as the one from which you were laid off.***
 - * Count your blessings. There are worse things than losing a job. Try to be grateful for what you do have.***

Job Search Anxiety: Warning Signs

The loss of a job hits both your pocketbook and your very identity. Negative feelings are only natural, but look out for these red flags indicating that outside support should be sought.

The loss of a job hits both your pocketbook and your very identity. Negative feelings are only natural after being laid off and going through a job search — especially in the current economic climate — but there are some red flags that indicate outside support should be sought, according to experts, especially when experience symptoms over prolonged periods of time.

- * Depressed mood***
- * Insomnia***
- * Significant weight gain or weight loss***
- * Withdrawal from activities***
- * Withdrawal from family***
- * Increased substance use***
- * Little things setting you off that didn't before***
- * Feelings of shame***
- * Feelings of helplessness***
- * Feelings of hopelessness***

If you think that you need assistance, seek professional counseling. Explore support group avenues and accountability partners that can assist in your recovery and focus. When at all possible, seek a counseling professional or organization with a proven track record.



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