

Workshop

COPING WITH JOB LOSS

Lossing a job can be one of the most devastating personal crises of a lifetime. Unemployment, divorce, and the death of a loved one are considered to be the most stressful and potentially debilitating events that an individual ever experiences. Although financial decline is a serious issue, the blow to one's ego is even more difficult to face. The losses include:

- Loss of self-esteem
- Loss of daily routine
- Loss of purposeful activity
- Loss of income
- Loss of predictability and sense of security.

Like any other calamitous event, however, the job loss crisis can present an opportunity for growth. Commitment and diligence are required to transform present pain into future positive outcomes. There are a number of emotional reactions that can enhance the process of "moving on." These phases of coping are necessary to achieve resolution of the crisis of job loss.

Acknowledgment

The first reactions to loss are pain, fear, and lowered self-esteem. Next, denial of these feelings serves to cushion the discomfort temporarily. Acknowledging these feelings can be a helpful first step toward making efforts to cope successfully. In recognizing the need to boost self-confidence, a plan of action will mobilize your resources. You can ask friends and family for help and support. You can not easily approach a job interview while feeling depressed, angry, bitter, discouraged, or fearful. Dealing openly and honestly with appropriate persons can free up positive emotional energy for job-seeking tasks.

It might be helpful to "debrief" the circumstances and events leading up to the loss of your job with a friend, a loved one, a professional counselor, or a support group. Sometimes, keeping a journal can help to put such an experi-

ence into perspective.

Ask yourself the following:

- What actually happened to cause me to lose my job?
- How did I receive news of the layoff?
- How did I react to the news?
- How long was I in that particular job?
- What was my relationship with my boss, my subordinates, my colleagues?

Seeking Support and Help. It will help you to know that a reactive depression is to be expected and is usually temporary. Focus on ways to nurture yourself, and ask for support and reassurance from others.

Venting the Anger and Resentment. Letting go of bitterness and anger is essential for resolving any personal crisis. Healthy ways of dealing with frustration include vigorous physical exercise, volunteering time for community activities, tackling long-postponed home tasks, etc. Running, swimming, raking, painting, and sweeping are good outlets and give you a sense of accomplishment.

Reassessment. The initial shock of a job loss may bring about "tunnel vision." All you can see are the negative aspects of your situation. Even though it was a very important source of self-esteem and income, your former job could not have offered all the things in life that are important to you. Try to make a conscious effort to think about other rewarding aspects of life that are truly of value. This is the time to reassess your strengths, weaknesses, and interests if you are to gain the confidence and optimism necessary for starting over again. This may turn out to be an important turning point for positive changes.

Impact on the Family. For a child, the loss of a job by a parent represents a significant change in his or her world. Children as well as adults need to go through a grief process. Children are perceptive. It is usually futile to try to keep such information from them. Without knowing the source of adult

unhappiness, a child might feel responsible for the sadness or anger. It is important for all members of the family to talk together and help each other while a parent is between jobs. Children can be understanding and supportive when they know they are not to blame.

Strategies to Maintain Financial Stability

Investigate severance pay and other benefits to which you may be entitled, such as outplacement services, an office and phone to use while looking for a job, and the continuation of health insurance benefits. Request agreements about pay-out schedules in writing. Other pointers are:

- *Notify creditors* of your current situation. A flexible payment schedule might be arranged.
- *Apply for unemployment benefits* that are available to you if you lost a job through no fault of your own. Check with your local jurisdiction for other requirements.
- *Follow a daily schedule;* work on resumes, make calls, do research, set up interviews for at least six hours a day.
- *Be good to yourself*—eat well, exercise, have fun, get adequate rest.
- *Focus on possibilities* and accomplishments, not on failures.

—Dr. Helene King
COPE, Inc.
Washington, D.C.

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