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# JOB LOSS

## *Getting Out and Letting Go*

It seems like such a simple question. You extend your hand to greet someone new. You introduce yourself, begin to chat and soon are asked, “And what do you do?” It is a question with as many meanings as answers. But if you are facing layoff or are unemployed, the question can cut to your core.

For most of us our job is more than a paycheck. Part of the intensity of job loss is that they form part of our identity. “We all attach different meanings to our jobs,” says career development specialist, Laura. “That makes a difference in how we move through the healing process after job loss.”

Losing your job hurts—deeply! Nobody knows how it feels better than you. While everyone is unique and reacts in their own way and in their own time, it is normal to experience a flood of emotions. “My head shut down and my emotions kicked in,” says Carole on hearing about her layoff. “It is not unusual for someone to tell me that they feel like they are going crazy,” says John Griffiths, an employment counsellor, “I tell them that the pain is real. I assure them that this is normal and that they are not alone.”

Past experiences, health and other life events all shape the intensity of this experience. The feelings can last a few minutes or months—and they can be re-triggered when we least expect them. When Carole finally got a new job in a field she loved, instead of being ecstatic and full of confidence, she was full of fear there’d been a mistake.

On first news of a closure or layoff, people report feeling numb and confused. Attempts to cope with the shock often bring denial. We tell ourselves stories. “This isn’t really happening. Someone will buy the plant and it will be okay or they will discover how much I do and ask me to stay.” As we begin to confront the contradictions between our denial response and reality, there is a natural reflex to retreat or withdraw to a quiet place to reflect and sort things out. Retreat can be both physical and emotional. Family members may feel shut out as the displaced worker spends more time alone or silently watching TV.

Following the initial shock of job loss, emotional stress, confusion and tension mount. The problem is it’s hard to tell you’ve past the crest until you can look back. Most experts agree that you and those around you need to allow you time to get through this, before you can get on with recovery.

During this early process you and people close to you may notice typical behaviours and reactions. Help may be rejected because it forces us to confront fears, doubts, anxieties—even the loss itself. We recoil instinctively from emotional shock, we withdraw in an effort to restore normality. It is usual to feel ineffectual or in chaos. Behaviour may be impulsive, act first—think later. Frustrated by impairment of usually good problem-solving skills, you may fall into old habits. “I went right out and bought a pack of smokes,” Dean says, “and I hadn’t smoked for six years.” And almost everyone notices communication, particularly with friends and family, becomes strained and difficult. Says Carole, “I had my walls up, trying to do everything by myself.”

All our emotional instincts urge us to get angry, get even and get lost. It is a combination that often makes us less trusting of others, particularly prospective employers, interviewers or employment counselors. It is normal to feel this way before we can move on. During this difficult period, clinical depression is a real risk. Consider seeing a doctor if any of these symptoms persist: panic attacks, disrupted sleep, night sweats, excessive weight loss or gain, substance abuse, or personal neglect.

Once we identify and understand this interplay of feelings, together with family and other supporters we can begin to separate the responses that will help from those that will impair our ability to move

forward and be ready to deal with them as they emerge. This is the first positive step to interrupt the cycle, regain control of your life and, ultimately, restore joy to life hopefully with a transition to re-employment.

### Normal Feelings of Loss

Frightened

Overwhelmed

Disgusted

Resentful

Embarrassed

Humiliated

Confused

Angry

Guilty

Powerless

Trapped

Demoralized

Disbelief

Hurt

*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the interviewees.*

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