

Coping with Job Loss

**By Paul H. Tobias and Susan Sauter. A selection from *Job Rights and Survival Strategies - 2003 National Employee Rights Institute, Inc. Reprinted with permission.*
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The impact of termination goes well beyond shaking a family's financial security. Job loss ranks with death and divorce as one of life's most stressful events. Strong negative emotions —anger, inadequacy, humiliation, anxiety, depression, and a host of other feelings —are not uncommon and are fully understandable following the loss of a job.

Nevertheless, negative emotions are not conducive to moving forward. If you start taking them along in your personal relationships and job interviews, they can be destructive.

Job loss is also a very personal experience, which people handle in very individual ways. Maintaining a positive outlook may not come easily to everyone, and may require serious effort on your part. A sincere effort to follow some of the following suggestions, however, should be beneficial.

1. Let Your Support System Be Supportive –

Trusted family members and friends will want to be helpful. Let them! This is not the time to push people away. Resist the temptation to close others off because you don't want to be a burden or a bore. You are still the same person with the same good traits you had before you lost your job. It is important for you and those closest to you to understand that you need time to cope and recover. Don't think you have to "go it alone" or "tough it out." It is when you shut others out that the pressures and frustrations take their greatest toll.

When "coping" doesn't alleviate feelings of grief, fear, or anger, enlist the help of family members, friends, neighbors and/or others who share your problem to establish support groups and to network. Asking for help is hard, but it is not admitting defeat; on the contrary, it is an indication of your intention to take control of your life.

2. Stay Active –

Do not remain idle while you are between jobs. Inactivity aggravates negative thoughts and feelings. Instruct a routine and try to stick with it.

Mental health experts agree we feel better when we are busy, especially when our thoughts are directed outside ourselves. Many people, whether or not they are employed, derive great satisfaction from performing volunteer work. For people who are out of work, volunteering has the added benefit of helping them maintain or enhance their job-related skills and may create an opportunity to learn new skills and develop new interests. Another plus is that working in a new setting and meeting new people can broaden

their network.

This is also a good time to tackle projects around the house and catch up on reading. But don't let these activities distract you from getting out and doing what it takes to get a new job!

3. Allocate Your Resources Carefully –

The loss of a steady paycheck can have a devastating financial impact, even in a two-income family. Develop a budget with your family, letting each member put forward their priorities. Work out a schedule of payments with your creditors, and avoid accumulating new debt as much as you possibly can. If necessary, seek help from your local consumer credit counseling organization.

4. Keep Fit and Healthy –

Nutrition –

Nutritionists tell us that stress lowers the level of serotonin, a natural mood lifter, in the brain and that eating carbohydrates ups the serotonin level, making people feel more relaxed. Some experts also suggest that eating balanced, smaller, more frequent meals helps calm a jittery stomach. Since the body has a strong need for nourishment during stress periods, it is wise to avoid processed foods and refined sugars and eat whole foods such as fruits and vegetables instead.

Experts say that a poor diet can leave you more vulnerable to the negative aspects of stress and more susceptible to illness.

Exercise –

Exercise is one of the best ways to reduce the effects of stress. It is also a good way to improve your overall physical and mental health. Research has identified several physical changes accompanying physical exercise. These positive changes include improved functioning of heart and lungs, better muscle tone, increased energy, weight control and improved sleeping patterns.

Regular, vigorous, physical exercise is perhaps the most natural, as well as the most beneficial, method of dealing with stress and tension. A well-conditioned body is best suited to handle stress. Exercise gives the body a chance to use the hormones that stressful situations pump into the bloodstream. It also prepares the body to handle more stress by increasing strength and endurance; reducing aches, pain and stiffness; lowering blood pressure; and increasing cardiac output by using up adrenalin which may be tensing muscles.

5. Steer Clear of Drugs and Alcohol –

Sometimes people who feel overwhelmed by job loss seek relief in drugs and alcohol. These substances only mask stress symptoms. They do not help you adjust to the stress itself. Turning to them can cause more stress in the long run than it relieves. Prescription medications such as sedatives or antidepressants are sometimes helpful in balancing a person's response to stress, but must be taken only under a doctor's direction and supervision.

6. Rest and Sleep –

Stress often produces insomnia or fitful sleep. Some techniques people can use to put themselves to sleep include progressive relaxation (sequentially tensing and fully releasing the muscles from head to foot), deep breathing (slowly inhaling and exhaling to a count of 10), and visualization (picturing a peaceful landscape or other pleasant vista).

7. Join a Support Group –

People who share your situation may be better prepared to listen and respond to your concerns than even the most well-meaning friends or relatives. With a group of people who understand what you are going through, you can let off steam, get feedback on your activities and give others the benefit of your wisdom. Many communities have support groups for job seekers that exchange tips and valuable information on the job market. You can usually find a support group by contacting your YMCA, YWCA or library. Sometimes employment agencies can lead you to a group that matches your needs.

8. Keep a Journal –

Some people find that writing things down provides a useful outlet and also helps them think through their problems. If you are planning to appeal your termination or take legal action, it is essential to make notes of the events as they occur, before your memory fades.

Anger needs an outlet. When you are angry at someone or something and cannot express it in person, vent your anger by writing down what angers you. Don't analyze or organize the information, just let it pour out onto the paper. After you are done, take the pages and crumple them up, stomp on them, rip them up and dump them (where they won't be found). According to Helen Lerner, the author of *Stress Breakers*, "These symbolic actions, combined with the physical energy spent doing this, maximizes the emotional release.

9. Seek Professional Counseling –

Maintaining your emotional well being is as important during this time as securing your financial future. If —after trying these coping mechanisms —you still find yourself frequently depressed, dwelling on the past, harboring thoughts of revenge, drinking excessively, or resorting to drugs to mask your feelings, you may want to ask a professional psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker for help.

Asking for professional help is not a sign of weakness, nor does it indicate a lack of self sufficiency. A well-trained professional can usually provide great relief while helping you to deal with your feelings and focus on the future. Your family doctor or minister can help you locate someone, as can organizations such as your local family service agency, mental health association, Jewish social services, or Catholic Charities. These and many other

agencies that can offer assistance are listed in the Yellow Pages.

Get the counseling while your health insurance coverage remains in effect. If your insurance does not cover mental health treatment or if the coverage is inadequate, ask the agencies you talk to whether their fees are based on a sliding scale determined by income. Check to see if there is an employer-sponsored confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which covers you.

10. Make Time to Have a Good Time –

Don't overlook the value of good times either on your own or with others. Even if you think you're not in the mood, you'll probably have a good time once you are out doing something you enjoy. In his book, *Anatomy of an Illness*, Norman Cousins wrote, "It has always seemed to me that hearty laughter is a good way to jog internally without having to go outdoors." Experts say that daily laughter makes you feel happier, healthier, more self-confident, and relaxed.

*This is a selection from **Job Rights and Survival Strategies** by Paul H. Tobias and Susan Sauter. For more complete information on this, and other job rights questions, go to <http://workplacefairness.org>.*

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