

Coping with Job Loss

Adapted from *Professionals in Transition Support Group, Inc. (2000)*^j

<http://www.jobsearching.org/coping.cfm>

Emotional Impact

Losing your job is a life-changing event. You may feel that your professional career has been taken away from you and, just as surely as you've lost a love one, you need time to grieve. The Professionals in Transition (PIT) Support Group have identified the "emotional wave™" (or e-wave™ for short), which represents the job-loss grief process.

Although job-loss grief is a universal experience, there are minor differences in the way individuals experience it. In that way, it's similar to bereavement. You might pass through all of its stages in sequence as you pass through the cycle. Or you might bypass one stage and jump directly to another, or experience the stages in a different order from most people. Sometimes it might take you weeks to cycle through the emotional wave™ stages, while at another time you speed through them all in the space of five minutes.

Along with the emotional issues you are likely to encounter when you're unemployed, there are also physical and behavioral symptoms of job-loss trauma. For example, many people report eating and sleeping disorders, dizziness, palpitations, forgetfulness, aching limbs, headaches, hyperventilating, perspiring, repetitive dreams, inordinate risk-taking, endless chattering, irritability, and hyperactivity while they're unemployed. There's often some interplay between the emotional, physical, and behavioral symptoms of job loss. For example, recurring nightmares might launch a bout of depression, or fear and panic might cause headaches or perspiring. While the actual physical and behavioral manifestations of unemployment vary widely from one person to another, the emotional wave™ typically unfolds in the context of at least some of these symptoms

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS	BEHAVIORAL SYMPTOMS
Loss of appetite	Dizziness
Forgetfulness	Heart Palpitations
Problems falling asleep	Aching Limbs
Lack of concentration	Repetitive Dreams
Anxiety Attacks	Irritability
Migraine headaches	Hyperactivity

Once you understand the emotional wave™, you can predict how it might shape the weeks ahead of you and prepare yourself to deal effectively with each emotional stage, as you encounter it. This is the first step toward interrupting the cycle, reestablishing control of your life and, ultimately, achieving reemployment

Understanding the "E wave"

Here's an overview of how the Emotional Wave™ works.

First, you get the news that you've been laid off. The sudden change in your life casts you adrift in a turbulent ocean. As you tumble from wave to wave, you experience shock and denial, fear and panic, anger, bargaining, depression, and temporary acceptance. Just when you think you've reached the trough of the wave, you begin to climb back up to the crest. The cycle continues until you learn to positively channel, rather than avoid, your real feelings. Once you're able to confront and manage your emotional wave™, you can navigate your way through the stormy waters and, eventually, safely reach the shore.

Stage 1: Shock and Denial

You might react to the news of your lay off stoically, bravely, or tearfully. Whatever your response, thoughts like the following are likely to engulf you:

- *How could this have happened to me?*
- *It must be a mistake.*
- *It's the end of the world.*
- *My life is over.*
- *What will I tell my spouse/partner and the kids?*

Whatever the specifics, thoughts of this nature will likely race through your mind when you get the bad news. The announcement of your lay off won't seem quite real and, at the time, nothing else will, either. You'll feel as detached as if you were watching yourself and the world around you in a movie. People often say, at this stage that they're "blown away" or they've "zoned out." In short, your mind shuts down to protect you. Although you may feel you've been "punched in the stomach," the full impact of your termination won't hit you for days, weeks, or however long it takes for the reality of your job loss sink in.

Coping With Shock and Denial

What should you do while you're going through the shock and denial stage of the e-wave? Do what you may feel like doing: nothing. Give yourself time and the privacy you need to recuperate. This isn't the time to write letters, call people, or broadcast the news of your job loss to the world (the only exception are your family members.) You've suffered a setback in your professional life, and may feel vulnerable to attack from other fronts.

Your fear and panic may also lead to indecisiveness. Every choice takes on an exaggerated importance, and you feel as though the world will end if you make the wrong decision. Fear, panic, and indecision are typical responses to losing your job. Nothing could be more natural than to worry about the future when your livelihood has just been threatened and you don't know what tomorrow will bring. However, uncontrolled and disproportionate fright can quickly drain your time and energy, and immobilize you, if you let it.

Stage 2: Fear and Panic

Once the first numbness wears off, fear and panic are likely to take over your thoughts. You feel a generalized sense of dread, and even relatively insignificant items and events can become menacing. Unemployment certainly brings with it a host of valid concerns. But during the fear and panic stage, you spend much of your time and energy "catastrophizing" about such issues as:

- *What if I have to declare bankruptcy?*
- *Will I lose everything I own?*
- *Will my family and friends abandon me?*
- *Is this the end of my career?*
- *Will any employer ever give me another chance?*

Coping With Fear and Panic

The key to both minimizing and surviving "fear and panic" is to put your concerns back into perspective. Denying or repressing your worries won't work, but neither will agonizing about them incessantly. So confront your fears on a reasonable timetable. Give yourself a "worry period" - say, fifteen minutes long - each day, and restrict your worrying to that time slot. If you catch yourself slipping up and fretting about the future outside of the designated time slot, stop. Make an "appointment" to deal with it later, during your sanctioned worrying time.

Another fear-halting strategy is to list your worries on a sheet of paper. Write down every gloomy unemployment scenario you can think of from "I'll never find another job as long as I live" to "My spouse will divorce me, and I'll be left all alone." Then, when you've committed all your fears to paper, decide which ones have a basis in reality and which others you can instantly dismiss. Strike the latter, which will undoubtedly include most of your "what if" worries, from your list. You'll then have a set of reasonable concerns that you can rehearse confronting and resolving, in case the time comes when you must do so. If you're having trouble making decisions, limit the time you give yourself to choose. Give yourself, say, two minutes to make an A/B choice - such as should you or shouldn't you make a phone call - and then stick with your decision. Take a step back from the problem, if you can, and consider it. You'll probably find that few choices you make are of the "forever" variety. In all likelihood, you'll get a chance to rectify any mistakes you happen to make, so it's okay to forge ahead for now

Stage 3: Anger

Once the fear and panic have run their course, you become "unzapped." You may express anger towards your former workplace and whatever else thwarts you. You may think:

- *This isn't fair.*
- *How can they do it to me?*
- *This is an outrage.*
- *They have no right.*
- *They can't imagine how I feel.*

Because there's no specific person at whom you can vent your rage, the anger accumulates inside of you. Your anger gets the heart beating, head thumping, and adrenaline flowing. Of course, you can't give into your anger. But you can use it. The secret to coping effectively is to *channel* your anger.

Anger is fire in your belly.

- It's righteous indignation. And it can energize you.
- Properly channeled, anger will make the difference between your being successful and unsuccessful in your job search.
- You can use your anger to propel yourself into positive activities that will lead to reemployment, when the time is right.
- But the flip side is that, if you let your anger fester, it will overwhelm and immobilize you. You'll not only be unemployable, but you'll also be impossible to live with or near. All you'll get in return for your anger is alienation, which will lead to more fury, and the cycle will continue.

To break out of this stage and, ultimately, put the trauma of unemployment behind you, you must learn to work through righteous your anger and forgive.

Coping With Anger

"If you want a stain out, shout it out," extolled the old laundry detergent commercial.

Shouting in an appropriate setting - say, inside your basement or garage when no one else is around - is an appropriate way of exhausting your anger, too. Your body will take the liberty of translating your emotions into physical actions, so why not take advantage of it? You can walk, run, or go to the soccer field and kick goals until you're exhausted. Other people report that kneading bread dough, beating sofa cushions, or throwing pillows helps them vent.

What you shouldn't do with your anger is suck it in, or air it at the wrong times or in the wrong places. Avoid the temptation to disparage your former employer in professional settings, such as during interviews or networking sessions, because an angry person - rightfully - is perceived as unemployable. The worst thing you can do is pretend that your anger does not exist. Remember, anger turned inwards may lead to depression. Professional counseling for appropriate anger management is available from

many sources including the Rutgers Faculty and Staff Assistance Program or perhaps through your health plan.

Stage 4: Bargaining

Once you're done gnashing your teeth, and you've run ten miles and dug the trench, you'll be exhausted. Your mind will go blank. You'll convince yourself that something or someone will come along to save you if only you prove yourself worthy. Thoughts like the following will occur to you:

- *Maybe it was all a mistake.*
- *The situation can't be as bad as it seems.*
- *I'll get another job right away.*
- *I'm due for something good to happen.*

You promise yourself that if your boss rehires you or you get another job, you'll never again complain about your job. You'll never take a paycheck for granted again. Once the money starts coming in, you'll start a savings account, a retirement plan, and a college fund for your kids. You'll become the worthiest employee, family member, and world citizen who ever was. You'll also likely begin experiencing a painless ending to your unemployment crisis.

In your attempt to make the pain go away, you may invent a "job savior." This is the person or event that will make everything okay. You may overly focus on one opportunity or one person you know who you are convinced will make it all better. You may believe there is someone "out there" who will eventually work a miracle and take away your pain.

Coping With Bargaining

No matter how much you might want to rely on fate, friends, or strangers to bail you out of the situation you're in, you have to accept the fact that finding a job is your responsibility. There are no job saviors. If you're still expecting your old buddy to rescue you, investigate the reality of what you're telling yourself. You will find a job, of course - but it will happen through your own efforts, not those of a miracle worker.

Stage 5: Depression

Once you realize that becoming the most deserving professional in the world won't get your former employer to reverse the layoff decision, despair may set in. You feel abandoned and as though everything you had - your routine, status, professional network, office, and even your coffee cup - has been taken away. So you decide you probably deserve to be where you are. Every nasty thing your partner, spouse, in-laws, kids, neighbors, or colleagues ever said about you was probably true. Every skeleton in your closet, whatever mistakes you've made, and any unresolved issues from your past come back to haunt you. Some of the ideas that creep into your mind are:

- *It's all my fault.*
- *You had it coming, hotshot.*
- *I'm worthless.*
- *This is the end of the road for me.*

Depression is, in effect, anger turned inward. People may knock on your door, and you don't want to answer. You may feel stupid and ashamed for losing your job. You just want to hide and be left alone. It's also common, while you're in the throes of depression, to hit bottom. When you reach the pit, there's only one direction in which you can go, and that's up. Unfortunately, hitting bottom isn't necessarily something that only happens once during your voyage through the e-wave. For some, it happens over and over again, and each time it arises they have to deal with it as if they were on their first round. The good news is that there are proven techniques you can use to move from depression to action.

Coping With Depression

When depression takes over, you'll be flooded with feelings of worthlessness, guilt, and lethargy. It takes all your energy just to get out of bed in the morning, and there isn't much left over for fighting your way out of the gloom. Yet that's exactly what you have to do. If you give into your depression, you'll never get your job search into gear. You'll remain in limbo, licking your wounds, and hiding yourself away from the world and everyone in it. What you should do instead is follow some PIT-tested techniques for chasing away the e-wave doldrums.

Depression is a cloud that, among other things, blots out your good feelings about yourself. Lift the cloud by forgiving your past misdeeds.

- Pamper yourself. Indulge in a bubble bath, a walk in the woods, a ticket to the opera, or whatever makes you feel special.
- Do all the things you never had time to do.
- Play with your kids, and spend time with your spouse, partner, or loved ones.
- Go to a comedy club or rent your favorite comics' videotapes; humor is another effective way to combat depression
- Step outside your situation, and understand that unemployment is a temporary condition.
- Treat yourself as if you were your own best friend.
- Do something productive and helpful for other people.
- Volunteer to chaperone your child's field trip, serve food at a soup kitchen, clean up the litter in a local playground, raise funds for your favorite charity, or the like.
- To combat the lethargy that depression often brings with it, exercise. Take advantage of one of the many recreational centers on campus.
- Running, walking, swimming, and other aerobic activities gives you energy. The goal isn't to beat your "personal best" score, log more miles than you ever have, or win a competition with anyone else. Rather, the idea is to let loose, shake off the blues, and do something nice for your mind and body. Also, exercising will help you sleep better, and you'll need your rest to keep yourself healthy enough to executive an effective job search.

You may want to seek professional help during this phase by contacting the Faculty & Staff Assistance Program (732-932-3020, ext. 4010) or seek out a professional through your health plan.

Stage 6: Temporary Acceptance

At some point, the gloom recedes, and you realize that it's time to move forward. Although the crisis of unemployment is still with you every moment of every day, you have some breathing room. You can think about where you've been, where you are, and where you're going. This is the e-wave stage when you're functioning at the highest level, and you can create an action plan. Some healthy concepts that begin to sink in are:

- *The past is past.*
- *It's time to move on.*
- *Sitting here on the sofa isn't doing me any good.*
- *I can't change anything by kicking myself in the butt.*
- *Why dwell on what I can't change?*
- *My job search is my responsibility, and I can make it happen.*
- *What I do with my future is up to me.*

In the temporary acceptance stage, you pick yourself up by the bootstraps, and get on with your life. You absolve yourself of blame for your unemployment and, at the same time, charge yourself with the responsibility for your career. But it is a temporary and fleeting stage, because with every rejection, rude rebuff, and insensitive response, you will find yourself "cycling through" the emotional wave.

Coping With Temporary Acceptance

If temporary acceptance were the final stop on the journey to re-employment recovery, there'd be nothing to cope with. It would be time to kick up your heels and celebrate. You'd be "over" the trauma of unemployment. But, as stated earlier, the Emotional Wave™ is a cycle rather than a series of linear stages. You might accept your situation with equanimity one day, and sink back into depression the next. One minute, you might be full of optimism, and the next, you might imagine yourself living in a bus station.

You'll experience extreme mood swings as long as you're unemployed.

- While you're riding the e-wave™, your feelings will be exaggerated.
- The highs will be higher, and the lows will be lower.
- Seemingly minor events - a rejection letter, a curt response to a phone call, or a holiday celebration - can catapult you from the plateau of temporary acceptance back through of shock and denial, fear and panic, anger, bargaining, or depression.

Use the sanctuary of temporary acceptance to prepare yourself for what lies ahead. Develop a plan for snatching victory from the jaws of grief, and for finding equanimity and dignity in every stage as you cycle through your Emotional Wave. Most importantly, prepare yourself to face the working world again from the perspective of personal responsibility, forgiveness, and confidence.

Moving On

A job may fall into your lap before you've fully traversed the Doom-Wave stages. In fact, your phone might be ringing as you read this, and the caller might be prepared to offer you a golden career opportunity. If that's the case, by all means, accept it.

Don't worry that you might miss something or sabotage your chances for long-term happiness because you haven't suffered enough. However, most people do find it necessary to work through the e-wave™ stages before they can successfully move on with their professional lives. Dealing with the trauma of unemployment from a position of knowledge and anticipation is the key to getting your career back on track. You should now have an idea of what to expect while you're riding the e-wave™ of unemployment.

ⁱ For brevity, portions of the original article were eliminated. To view the full text of the article, visit <http://www.jobsearching.org/coping.cfm>