

Life After Job Loss

Knowing the emotional stages can help you come out ahead.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people in this country lose their job. Losing one's job takes an emotional as well as a practical toll.

However, after some time, many people also discover that life after job loss can mean an exciting, new beginning. Regardless of age or job, people who have positive attitudes, work hard and follow their hearts often come out ahead. A job crisis provides them with a stronger sense of self, greater control of their careers and opportunities to pursue dreams that offer personal and professional satisfaction.

Dismissed employees often go through five emotional stages, and you can benefit from understanding these stages and how they might affect you. You may move back and forth between the stages, but to grow through the process, you must deal with feelings and thoughts related to each stage.

1. Shock, Denial, and Disbelief

What to expect: This stage is characterized by numbness and refusal to accept the news. This reaction protects you from being overwhelmed. Shock is particularly acute if your identity is wrapped up in your work. If who you are is your job, you're vulnerable because someone can take it away.

What to do: Make no major decisions now. Digest the hurtful feeling and release your feelings. Talk to a sympathetic listener, like a family member or close friend. Explore issues you want to address by writing in a journal. If necessary, seek professional help.

Practice stress relievers such as deep breathing exercises and meditation. Eat a healthy diet and exercise. Assess your finances, develop a budget and adjust your lifestyle to your situation. Follow a routine.

2. Fear and Anxiety

What to expect: You may be concerned because you don't know how you'll pay the mortgage and medical insurance, or for that matter, what you'll do next.

In this stage, you're mourning and resisting change. Your security is threatened. You feel powerless and afraid of looking foolish. You may become forgetful.

What to do: Accept the loss. Don't lie about it. It's not shameful to lose a job; don't confuse losing with failing.

Acknowledge your fears. Are you afraid of material losses? Rejection? The unknown? Live in the present. Schedule quiet time to reassess who you are and what you want.

3. Resistance, Anger, and Blame

What to expect: In this stage, you may doubt your ability to survive.

Anger can be healthy because it means you value yourself. It's common to complain and blame others. But while blame explains some events, it rarely resolves everything.

What to do: Acknowledging and dealing with anger helps you move forward, dispel negative feelings, diminish stress and increase self-understanding. Resolving anger and blame will help you present yourself more favorably to prospective employers.

Continue to talk and write about your situation. Explore questions such as, "Why me?" "What could I have done differently?" and "What dreams can I pursue?" Writing makes you address emotions, appraise your situation and confront your predicament. Participating in community activities can be helpful. Or consider joining a support group for people who are facing the same challenge. Regular meetings provide opportunities to vent anger, generate ideas, network and receive encouragement and positive feedback.

4. Acceptance and Exploration

What to expect: During this positive stage, you realize you'll make it. You accept yourself and explore opportunities. You clarify goals and swing into action.

What to do: Don't settle. Take time to understand yourself, and explore your passion. If necessary, take a survival job while pursuing your dream.

Work at developing a positive outlook. Your attitude about yourself will determine how others see you. Pay attention to your thoughts and inner conversations—they have a powerful effect on your emotional well-being. Becoming aware of exactly what you're saying to yourself can help you understand your reactions. It can also give you a handle on controlling your moods and repeating your successes. Keep a log to track the negative things you think and say. Each time you catch yourself thinking something negative, replace it with a positive thought.

Don't worry, this doesn't mean whistling a happy tune or spouting mindless affirmations. It's about creating a more accurate internal dialogue so you can think in new and more productive ways. When people feel down about something, their knee-jerk thinking tends to fall into patterns that hinder them from dealing effectively with a change. Bad moods tilt thinking toward flawed assumptions, drawing conclusions too quickly or focusing on distractions, among other things.

Here's an example of a knee-jerk thought: "I'm laid off. This is awful. This is not what I had in mind at all. I liked the way things were."

An example of a positive thought: "It really isn't the way I thought things would go, and it's true I was pretty comfortable, but I had been thinking that I was stagnating in that job. This gives me a jump-start to try to find something better."

5. Commitment

What to expect: This stage involves focusing on a new course of action.

What to do: Put extra effort into your search for a new position. Consider this a full-time job. It's important to know yourself and your career options, how to set career goals and where to find advice and assistance in job search and marketing techniques. A career counselor can be helpful. Many large companies offer outplacement counseling.

A career crisis can provide you with a stronger sense of self, greater control over your career and opportunities to pursue dreams that offer greater personal and professional satisfaction.

Loss of a job can be the beginning of something better.

Kanchier, C. (Reviewed 2019). *Life after a layoff*. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

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