



Learning to Live Through Loss: When Job Loss Triggers Grief¹

Carolyn S. Wilken²

Losses of all kinds bring grief. If you have lost your job, you may find yourself dealing with a wide range of unexpected emotions. You may feel hurt and angry, hopeless, or even useless. It is easy to understand why being unemployed can be so painful. Losing a job produces grief.

A job provides us with much more than a way to spend our time and a way to make money. Our identity and the way others see us are often influenced by our jobs. For example, when we meet someone for the first time, we often ask, “And what do you do?” Our jobs give us a chance to use our talents, to be productive and to share our lives with others.

Some people describe losing a job as “losing part of my self.” Some unemployed people keep going back by the old workplace, watching as though searching for a lost friend. All this is a part of grief.

If you have lost your job, you have a valid reason to grieve. This fact sheet will help you understand more about what's happening to you. For more information about grief and mourning, read “Learning to Live through Loss: Grief and the

Mourning Process,” FCS 2267, available from your Extension office.

What You Can Expect in Yourself

The grief associated with job loss brings an array of emotions. Each person is unique and will react to unemployment in a distinctive way.

However, many unemployed persons experience some of these feelings:

- Numbness, at first
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Embarrassment
- Feeling of losing control
- Distrust of employers, business
- Blaming self for being unemployed

1. This document is FCS2264, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611. First published: November 2006. Reviewed: September 2008. Originally published in 1994 by Kansas State University CES. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Carolyn S. Wilken, PhD, M.P.H., associate professor, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, IFAS, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611. We would like to thank Cheryl Bailey, LMHC, Haven Hospice of North Central Florida, for her comments and suggestions.

- Paranoia
- Hostility
- Self-consciousness
- Loss of confidence
- Feeling like a failure
- Feeling jealous of those who did not lose a job
- Bad moods

The strength of your emotions depends on your circumstances. Unpaid bills, a deep attachment to the job, previous emotional difficulties, and other recent losses can make coping more difficult.

Other people can add to your grief with careless words. When managers and companies don't know how to kindly announce layoff or terminations, their insensitivity can leave you feeling abandoned, betrayed, or incompetent. Friends and family members feel awkward and may say things which unintentionally hurt you. Try to let these unthinking remarks go. Protect your self-esteem by forgiving and going on with your life.

How You Respond Will Affect Your Family

Your well-being directly affects your family. As your emotional difficulties increase, so do theirs. Research shows that the loss of a job itself neither breaks up families or brings them closer together. Your reaction to the loss of your job is what counts.

Some people begin drinking more heavily to escape the grief of their unemployment. Others become harsh with family members. In our society, domestic abuse tends to increase when many people are unemployed. Negative coping behaviors, such as drinking or abuse, can destroy families.

Actions Which Help

When you first learn that you will lose your job, remain calm. Don't yell at your manager or boss. You will be reentering the job market, and you will need good references from these people. If you've already said things you regret, consider going back to

honestly apologize: "I didn't mean what I said the other day, Joe. I guess I was just shocked and scared."

Keep in mind that other hardworking people have lost their jobs and have survived. You will, too. Chances are you lost your job because of economic decisions beyond your control. Don't blame yourself. Battering your self-esteem with doubts, blame, and embarrassment doesn't help. You need all the self esteem you can muster to find another job. If you have trouble with feelings of blame and embarrassment, talk with others who have lost their jobs. You will find that others feel this way. Do your best to overcome these feelings quickly because they can interfere with your job search.

Use whatever help your employer offers to get a new job: references, training, leads on other opportunities. If your company offers counseling, accept it for yourself and your family. Losing a job is traumatic.

Be honest with your family about what has happened and how you feel. This affects them too. It is best to explain the situation to children. Children will pick up that something is wrong; often they blame themselves or imagine their own more horrible explanations if you don't tell them the facts.

Get a grip on your financial situation right away. Apply for unemployment compensation immediately. In most cases, it will take time to receive the first check. Work with your family to make a budget. If you expect you may have difficulty paying creditors in full, tell them soon. Creditors are much more willing to work with you if you do. Reducing financial stresses will help you focus more on getting back to work.

Try to determine in advance how long you and your family can last financially without your income. Set a time limit for when you will accept your second or third choice of jobs, just in case the kind of work you prefer isn't available. Some people try to hold out indefinitely, waiting for the "right job" to open up.

While you are unemployed, continue to find ways to take pride in and enjoy your family. The

families who handle job loss best keep communication lines open and find ways to appreciate one another. Times can get tough, even for healthy families. But these families report that their relationships soon went back to normal or had even improved. Your choice in how you react makes all the difference.

Helping Someone Through Job Loss

- Unemployed persons and their families need friends to talk to. Be there. Listen.
- Allow the person the opportunity to grieve.
- Be positive: “You were good enough to get the last job; you are good enough to get another.”
- Help the person avoid distractions. His or her full-time task right now is finding another job.
- Offer free child care to allow the person time to search, apply, and interview for new positions.
- Ask your network of friends and acquaintances if they know of any openings which may meet your friend's skills.
- Value the volunteer work or the household contributions of the unemployed person.

Publications

What Smart People Do When Losing Their Jobs, by Kathleen A. Riehle, 1991. John Wiley and Sons, Inc.: New York.

References

Archer, John and Valerie Rhodes. 1987. Bereavement and reaction to job loss: A comparative review. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 26, 211-244.

Leana, Carrie R. and Daniel C. Feldman. 1990. Individual responses to job loss: Empirical findings from two field studies. *Human Relations*, 43(11), 1155-1181.

Liem, Ramsay and Joan Huser Liem. 1988. Psychological effects of unemployment on workers

and their families. *Journal of Social Issues*, 44(4), 87-105.

Riehle, Katharine A. 1991. *What smart people do when losing their jobs*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Voydanoff, Patricia, and Linda C. Madka, eds. 1988. *Families and economic distress: Coping strategies and social policy*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.