Job Loss and Unemployment Stress

While the stress of losing a job can seem overwhelming, there are many things you can do to take control of the situation, maintain your spirits, and find a renewed sense of purpose.

The stress of losing a job

Whether you’ve been laid off, downsized, forced to take early retirement, or seen contract work dry up, losing your employment is one of life’s most stressful experiences. Aside from the obvious financial anguish it can cause, the stress of losing a job can also take a heavy toll on your mood, relationships, and overall mental and emotional health.

Our jobs are often more than just the way we make a living. They influence how we see
ourselves, as well as the way others see us. Even if you didn’t love your job, it likely provided you a social outlet and gave a structure, purpose, and meaning to your life. Suddenly finding yourself out of work can leave you feeling hurt, angry, or depressed. You might be questioning your identity, grieving all that you’ve lost, or feeling anxious about what the future holds.

Depending on the circumstances of your unemployment, you may feel betrayed by your employer, powerless over the direction of your life, or blame yourself for some perceived shortcoming or mistake. The stress and worry can feel overwhelming. But no matter how bleak things seem right now, there is hope. With time and the right coping techniques, you can come to terms with these setbacks, ease your stress and anxiety, and move on with your working life.

If you’ve lost your job due to the coronavirus outbreak...

Millions of people around the world have lost their jobs, sources of income, or been furloughed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the widespread, unprecedented nature of the crisis means that you shouldn’t feel any blame for your situation, that may be of little comfort when you’re stressed about paying bills and putting food on the table.

It’s easy to feel overwhelmed by uncertainty about when and how the economy will recover or if you’ll be able to find work. It’s important to know that you’re not alone; many of us are facing the same insecurity at this time. In addition to the following tips for coping with the stress of losing a job, there are also steps you can take to better deal with uncontrollable circumstances and an uncertain future.

Coping with job loss stress tip 1: Allow yourself to grieve

Grief is a natural response to loss, and that includes the loss of a job. As well as the loss of income, being out of work also comes with other major losses, some of which may be just as difficult to face:

- A feeling of control over your life
- Your professional identity
- Your self-esteem and self-confidence
A daily routine
Purposeful activity
Friendships and a work-based social network
You and your family’s sense of security

Facing your feelings

While everyone grieves differently, there are healthy and unhealthy ways to mourn the loss of your job. It can be easy to turn to habits such as drinking too much or binging on junk food for comfort. But these will only provide fleeting relief and in the long-term will make you feel even worse. Acknowledging your feelings and challenging your negative thoughts, on the other hand, will help you deal with the loss and move on.

- **Give yourself time to adjust.** Grieving the loss of your job and adjusting to unemployment can take time. Go easy on yourself and don’t attempt to bottle up your feelings. If you allow yourself to feel what you feel, even the most unpleasant, negative feelings will pass.
- **Write about your feelings.** Express everything you feel about being laid off or unemployed, including things you wish you had (or hadn’t) said to your former boss. This is especially cathartic if your termination was handled in an insensitive way.
- **Accept reality.** While it’s important to acknowledge how difficult job loss and unemployment can be, it’s equally important to avoid wallowing. Rather than dwelling on your job loss—the unfairness, how poorly it was handled, the ways you could have prevented it, or how much better life would be if it hadn’t happened—try to accept the situation. The sooner you do so, the sooner you can get on with the next phase in your life.
- **Avoid beating yourself up.** It’s easy to start criticizing or blaming yourself when you’re unemployed. But it’s important to avoid putting yourself down. You’ll need your self-confidence to remain intact as you’re looking for a new job. Challenge every negative thought that goes through your head. If you start to think, “I’m a loser,” write down evidence to the contrary: “I lost my job because of the lockdown, not because I was bad at my job.”
- **Think of your job loss as a temporary setback.** Most successful people have experienced major setbacks in their careers but have turned things around by picking themselves up, learning from the experience, and trying again. You can do the same.
- **Look for any silver lining.** The feelings generated by losing a job are easier to accept if you can find the lesson in your loss. That can be very difficult at such a low point in your life, but ask yourself if there’s anything you can learn from this experience.
Maybe your unemployment has given you a chance to reflect on what you want out of life and rethink your career priorities. Perhaps it’s made you stronger. If you look, you may be able to find something of value.

**Tip 2: Reach out to stay strong**

Your natural reaction at this difficult time may be to withdraw from friends and family out of shame or embarrassment. But don’t underestimate the importance of other people when you’re faced with the stress of job loss and unemployment. Social contact is nature’s antidote to stress. Nothing works better at calming your nervous system than talking face to face with a good listener.

- The person you talk to doesn’t have to be able to offer solutions; they just have to be a good listener, someone who’ll listen attentively without becoming distracted or passing judgement.
- As well as making a huge difference in how you feel, reaching out to others can help you feel more in control of your situation, and you never know what opportunities will arise.
- You may want to resist asking for support out of pride but opening up won’t make you a burden to others. In fact, most people will be flattered that you trust them enough to confide in them, and it will only strengthen your relationship.

**Developing new relationships after your job loss**

When we lose our jobs, many of us also lose the friendships and social networks that were built in the workplace. But it’s never too late to expand your social network outside of work. It can be crucial in both helping you cope with the stress of job loss—as well as finding a new job.

**Build new friendships.** Meet new people with common interests by taking a class or joining a group such as a book club, dinner club, or sports team.

**Join a job club.** Other job seekers can be invaluable sources of encouragement, support, and job leads. Being around others facing similar challenges can help energize and motivate you during your job search.

**Network for new employment.** The vast majority of job openings are never advertised; they’re filled by networking. Networking may sound intimidating or difficult, especially when it comes to finding a job, but it doesn’t have to be, even if you’re an introvert or you
feel like you don’t know many people.

Get involved in your community. Try attending a local event, mentoring youngsters, supporting your church or temple, or becoming politically active.

Tip 3: Involve your family for support

Unemployment affects the whole family, so don’t try to shoulder your problems alone. Keeping your job loss a secret will only make the situation worse. Your family’s support can help you survive and thrive, even during this difficult time.

Open up to your family. Whether it’s to ease the stress or cope with the grief of job loss, now is the time to lean on the people who care about you, even if you take pride in being strong and self-sufficient. Keep them in the loop about your job search and tell them how they can support you.

Listen to their concerns. Your family members are worried about you, as well as their own stability and future. Give them a chance to talk about their concerns and offer suggestions regarding your employment search.

Make time for family fun. Set aside regular family fun time where you can enjoy each other’s company, let off steam, and forget about your unemployment troubles. This will help the whole family stay positive.

Helping children cope with a parent’s job loss

Children can be deeply affected by a parent’s unemployment. It is important for them to know what has happened and how it will affect the family. However, try not to overburden them with too many emotional or financial details.

Keep an open dialogue with your children. Children have a way of imagining the worst when they write their own “scripts,” so the truth can actually be far less devastating than what they envision.

Make sure your children know it’s not anybody’s fault. Children may not understand about job loss and immediately think that you did something wrong to cause it. Or, they may feel that somehow they are responsible or financially burdensome. They need reassurance in these matters, regardless of their age.
Children need to feel as if they are helping. They want to help and allowing them to contribute in ways such as taking a cut in allowance, deferring expensive purchases, or getting an after-school job can make them feel as if they are part of the team.

Tip 4: Find other ways to define yourself

For many of us, our work shapes our identities and defines who we are. After all, when you meet someone new, one of the first questions they ask is, “What do you do?” When we lose our jobs, we feel a loss of self. But it’s important to remember that being unemployed doesn’t have to define who you are as a person. It’s up to you define yourself, not the state of the economy or a company’s decision to lay you off.

Pursue activities that bring purpose and joy to your life. By pursuing meaningful hobbies, activities, and relationships, you can reaffirm that it’s these things define you as an individual, not your employment status. We all have different ways of experiencing meaning and joy, so choose something that’s important to you.

Try a new hobby that enriches your spirit or pick up a long-neglected hobby. If you’ve neglected outside activities in favor of work, now is the time to take a class, join a club, or learn something such as a foreign language or new work-related skill. At a time when money may be tight, look for events and activities that are inexpensive to attend.

Express yourself creatively. Write your memoirs, start a blog, take up painting or photography.

Spend time in nature. Work in your yard, take a scenic hike, exercise a dog, or go fishing or camping. Spending time in nature is also a great stress reliever.

Volunteer. Helping others or supporting a cause that’s important to you is an excellent way to maintain a sense of meaning and purpose in your life. Volunteering can also provide career experience, social support, and networking opportunities.

Tip 5: Get moving to relieve stress

If work commitments prevented you from exercising regularly before, it’s important to make the time now. Exercise is a powerful antidote to stress. As well as relaxing tense muscles and relieving tension in the body, exercise releases powerful endorphins to improve your mood. Trimming your waistline and improving your physique may also give your self-
confidence a boost.

- Aim to exercise for 30 minutes or more per day, or break that up into short, 10-minute bursts of activity. A 10-minute walk can raise your spirits for two hours.
- Rhythmic exercise, where you move both your arms and legs, is a hugely effective way to lift your mood, increase energy, sharpen focus, and relax both the mind and body. Try walking, running, weight training, swimming, martial arts, or even dancing.
- To maximize stress relief, instead of continuing to focus on your thoughts, focus on your body and how it feels as you move: the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, for example, or the wind on your skin.

**Tip 6: Eat well to keep your focus**

Your diet may seem like the last thing you should concern yourself with when you’re facing the stress of losing your job and trying to make ends meet. But what you put in your body can have a huge effect on your levels of energy and positivity.

**Minimize sugar and refined carbs.** You may crave sugary snacks or comfort foods such as pasta, white bread, potatoes, or French fries, but these high-carbohydrate foods quickly lead to a crash in mood and energy.

**Reduce your intake of foods that can adversely affect your mood,** such as caffeine and chemical preservatives or hormones.

**Eat more Omega-3 fatty acids to give your mood a boost.** The best sources are fatty fish (salmon, herring, mackerel, anchovies, sardines), seaweed, flaxseed, and walnuts.

**Avoid nicotine.** Smoking when you’re feeling stressed may seem calming, but nicotine is a powerful stimulant, leading to higher, not lower, levels of stress and anxiety.

**Drink alcohol in moderation.** Alcohol may temporarily reduce worry, but too much can cause even greater anxiety as it wears off.

**Tip 7: Take care of yourself**

The stress of job loss and unemployment can take a toll on your well-being and leave you more vulnerable to mental health problems. Now more than ever, it’s important to take care of yourself.
Maintain balance in your life. Don’t let your job search consume you. Make time for fun, rest, and relaxation, whatever revitalizes you. Your job search will be more effective if you are mentally, emotionally, and physically at your best.

Get plenty of sleep. Sleep has a huge influence on your mood and productivity. Make sure you’re getting between 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night. It will help you keep your stress levels under control and maintain your focus throughout your job search.

Practice relaxation techniques. Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, and yoga are a powerful antidote to stress. They also boost your feelings of serenity and joy and teach you how to stay calm and collected in challenging situations, including job interviews.

Tip 8: Stay positive to keep up your energy

If it’s taking you longer than anticipated to find work, the following tips can help you stay focused and upbeat.

Keep a regular daily routine. When you no longer have a job to report to every day, you can easily lose motivation. Treat your job search like a job, with a daily “start” and “end” time, with regular times for exercise and networking. Following a set schedule will help you be more efficient and productive.

Create a job search plan. Avoid getting overwhelmed by breaking big goals into small, manageable steps. Instead of trying to do everything at once, set priorities. If you’re not having luck in your job search, take some time to rethink your goals.

List your positives. Make a list of all the things you like about yourself, including skills, personality traits, accomplishments, and successes. Write down projects you’re proud of, situations where you excelled, and skills you’ve developed. Revisit this list often to remind yourself of your strengths.

Focus on what you can control. You can’t control how quickly a potential employer calls you back or whether or not they decide to hire you. Rather than wasting your precious energy worrying about situations that are out of your hands, turn your attention to what you can control during your unemployment, such as learning new skills, writing a great cover letter and resume, and setting up meetings with your networking contacts.

Help yourself to stay on task. If you’re having trouble following through with these self-
help tips to cope with job loss and unemployment stress, HelpGuide’s free Emotional Intelligence Toolkit can help. By learning to manage troublesome thoughts, stress, and difficult emotions you’ll find it easier to follow through on positive intentions and regain control of your job search.

Get more help

How to Handle the Emotional Side of Job Loss and Job Search with Resiliency – Deal with the emotional challenge of job loss and searching for new employment. (Resiliency Center)

Managing Job Loss and Financial Stress (PDF) – Helping yourself and your family cope with stress and financial worries following job loss. (University of Hawaii)