

Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

The First Days After Losing Your Job

Many people lose their jobs for business-related reasons. They may become unemployed because of economic pressures, a change in management, a company reorganization, or a merger or acquisition. Changing jobs is now common. The average young worker can expect to have more than a dozen jobs in his or her lifetime. As globalization and robotic technology advance, the rate of job change could rise.

Still, losing a job usually involves profound feelings of sadness and loss. You may feel that you're losing financial stability and a clear sense of your future. You may feel that you're also losing meaningful friendships with co-workers and a sense of purpose and self-worth. This article will help you find resources and support that can help you cope in the days ahead.

The emotions people commonly feel

After a layoff or downsizing, most people experience a range of emotions. Common emotions include:

Shock. "Is this really happening?" "Why me?" "What now?" These feelings may last only a few days.

Sadness, failure, and shame. Unemployment is one of the most stressful experiences a person can undergo. Almost everyone feels sad after losing a job, and that sadness is often coupled with a sense of failure and shame. These feelings can last several weeks or longer.

Anger. You may feel very angry—with the company, with management, or with co-workers who were not laid off. These feelings are normal. But it's important to control your anger and to maintain your professionalism. You'll want good relationships with your contacts for the future. Instead of directing anger at those who are still at work, find someone outside the company (though not a networking contact) who can be your sounding board—a trusted friend or relative who can listen and sympathize.

Loss of control. We all like to feel in control of our lives. However, the future you had planned may now seem uncertain. You may wonder if you'll ever find another job. It's important to remember that many hardworking employees lose their jobs every year due to downsizing. While you may have no control over the business decision that led to your job loss, you can control how you react to that decision. Once you get over the initial shock of losing your job, the more actively you plan your job search and your future, the better you will feel.

Your personal circumstances may also influence how you feel about your job loss and prospects for the future.

If you've worked somewhere for a long time, a layoff may feel especially difficult.

If you are a single parent, are supporting a dependent relative, or are the sole or major breadwinner in your household, you may feel more stress. Get the support you need and use the tools and resources provided for you by your organization to move on quickly.

If you've suffered other recent losses in your life, a job loss may be even more difficult. If you've lost a friend or relative, for example, or if your marriage or relationship has ended, losing a job may hit you especially hard.

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Coping and finding support

It's not unusual to feel overwhelmed by your emotions following a job loss. You may also feel isolated as you give up ties with co-workers and familiar routines. What's most helpful during this time is to connect with family and friends and to seek support.

Find out what resources are available through your employer. Talk with your manager about support offered by the company. An employee assistance program (EAP) that offers referrals for counselling and other resources may be available to you. The EAP may be able to provide resources for you and your family that can help with any personal, family, financial, legal, drug, alcohol, or work-related concerns you may have. There may also be outplacement or career-transition resources available to you to help with writing resumes, practicing for interviews, and planning job-search strategies.

Find a trusted confidant. At first, your spouse or partner may be your primary support person, but he or she is also dealing with the stress of your job loss and may share some of the same fears that you do. Relying solely on your spouse or partner for support can strain your relationship. Over the long run, good support may come from people such as religious leaders, trusted friends, or those who have also been through a job loss.

Support groups help. Many people benefit from joining or forming support groups following a job loss —to connect with others, to network, and to talk about job-search strategies. Some EAPs help employees find support groups. Other ways to locate support groups in your area include contacting local religious organizations, community centres, public libraries, colleges, and your local Y. You can also find online resources on professional networking sites.

If you're having trouble coping, seek help. Contact the EAP if you are still eligible, your health care provider, or a counsellor or therapist if you experience any of the following for more than a couple of weeks: difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much, a significant change in appetite, withdrawing from others, loss of interest in activities you normally enjoy, inability to concentrate, or increased alcohol or drug use. Seek help immediately if you have thoughts of harming yourself or others.

Try to keep things in perspective. A job loss can feel like the end of the world. Patience and perseverance will help you make it through this trying time. Bear in mind that many people eventually come to look back on a layoff as a beneficial turning point in their careers.

The first 72 hours

The first 72 hours after a job loss are the hardest for many people. Here are some specific suggestions to help you get through this period:

Go home and talk with your family, spouse, partner, or close friends. Talking about your job loss will help you process what happened. Telling others will also help you feel less alone.

Watch what you say in email or texts that others could forward. Your feelings may change a lot over the next week or two. A hasty email or text message could give people the wrong idea about how well you'll cope in the long run. Be especially careful when sending former co-workers email or text messages that they could forward. Keep in mind that loyalties often shift after someone leaves an organization. Friendly co-workers may now feel torn between their ties to you and to your former boss. If you hope to keep in touch with co-workers, wait until you can write a calm and professional message. If they reach out to you, you don't need to do more in the first few days than to thank them for their support and say that you hope to stay in touch in the future.

Limit or avoid your use of social media until you've had time to think through what's happened. You might want to stay off Facebook or Twitter for a few days, or simply react to friends' posts about their lives instead of getting into the change in yours. An angry or emotional post could

cause your contacts to question your professionalism. It could also come back to haunt you as you look for a job—many employers check the social media pages of job candidates.

Allow yourself to cry and grieve. Don't feel you always have to "put on a happy face." Spend time with people who will let you be sad, vent, and express your feelings. However, don't wallow in your misfortune. As soon as you feel up to it, begin to identify the opportunities that can come out of this change. Your positive and professional approach will help others to become confident advocates on your behalf.

Do not make major financial or life decisions. During the first 72 hours do not withdraw money from your retirement funds or decide to pick up and move. Now is probably not the time for a dream vacation or to pay off your credit cards or buy a business. As with all loss, give yourself time to absorb the news and adjust. Consider postponing any major or life-changing decisions for the next 30 to 60 days. You need time to think and plan.

Read through any separation or severance information you may have been given by the company. You'll find information on benefits, resources, severance pay, retirement savings, job training, and unemployment compensation benefits. Workers who lose jobs in a layoff or work-force reduction may be eligible for unemployment compensation through a state agency. Your human resources (HR) department or your state unemployment office can tell you how to initiate a claim.

Don't spend a lot of time thinking about how to get your job back, how to change the company's decision, or how to "get back" at the company. Focusing on the future will help you move forward. And remember not to badmouth your former employer. That will hurt your reputation. Although anger is a typical reaction following a layoff, dwelling on the negatives or on things that you can't change won't help you focus on the future in a positive way.

Avoid contacting prospective employers or making new professional contacts on social media until you have a new career focus. You'll want to make a good first impression. Wait a few days before sending out resumes or making phone calls. When you're ready to present yourself as a highly professional and accomplished candidate, you'll be ready to turn to LinkedIn and your network.

Take extra steps if you have children. Children often find it very confusing when a parent loses a job. They may wonder why a parent is home all day, how the change will affect them, or even blame themselves for what's happened (if, for example, they know that their morning delays have at times caused a parent to be late for work). Talk with them in an honest and age-appropriate way. If you're unsure of what to say, search online for "talking with children about a layoff [or unemployment or the loss of a job]." Don't make promises you may not be able to keep—for example, avoid saying "you'll still be able to go to camp next summer" if it may not be true. Consider talking with a child therapist if your child has trouble adjusting to the change.

The importance of taking care of yourself

Losing a job can be very stressful and has even been linked to health risks. Remember to take good care of yourself. Commit to doing something that you enjoy each day to balance your time and to reduce the normal stress that is associated with a job search.

- Eat balanced meals.
- Get enough sleep.
- Get exercise. Exercise is often a healthy way to reduce stress.
- Find ways to relax. You can reduce stress through meditation, deep-breathing exercises, yoga, or whatever relaxation method works for you.
- Go for a walk with a friend.
- Pamper yourself. Listen to music. Take long baths. Cook food you enjoy eating.
- Make a list of your past accomplishments and refer to it whenever you need a boost.

- Do things you enjoy. Start a project at home. Pursue a hobby. Or volunteer at an organization you believe in.
- Find a way to structure your day. Build into your schedule regular times for exercise, meals, going to bed and waking up, and looking for a new job. All of these will help to keep you moving forward while providing some of the stability and continuity that your job used to offer.
- Spend time with family and people you love.