

## **Coping with Job Loss: A Map of the Territory**

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The work ethic-- based on the ideal of productivity-- is the keystone of American culture. Most of us grow up assuming we will be gainfully employed and work hard to achieve the security and fulfillment that employment can and should provide. A shaky economy, fundamental changes in the work environment and instability in our world is threatening the security of millions of Americans whose are being "down-sized," "right-sized," "reorganized," or fired from their jobs. If you are one of them, welcome to the world of shock, stress, grief, and uncertainty.

Losing a job or experiencing an enforced career change is a major life stressor, according to the Holmes-Rahe Social Readjustment Ratings Scale. Job loss has practical consequences-- loss of income and benefits. But it is often the emotional fallout that can take the biggest toll; the feeling that you have lost control of your life. Losing a job can set off a roller coaster ride of emotions that can affect every corner of your life:

- your feelings of well-being and security,
- your relationships,
- your self image,
- your physical health,
- your daily routine
- and more.

Just how hard this transition hits you depends on many individual factors:

- Your age
- How long you were at the job
- Whether you have experienced job loss before
- Your emotional health and how you have handled past losses
- How you felt about your job and the company
- The "humaneness" of your severance
- Whether you were the only one, or were among many laid off
- Your financial safety net
- Your support network

It is important to recognize that the loss of a job sets in motion a grief reaction not unlike the grief that follows many major losses, such as the death of a loved one and the dissolution of a marriage. Grief is grief. You can't run away from it. You can't speed it up. You can't go around it. Not without consequences anyway. You have to go **through** it. Although there are no hard-and-fast stages of grief, there are common reaction patterns. And it helps to know the territory -- and that you are normal. Many have successfully gone through this transition before you and many will follow.

**So what can you expect to feel?**

**Shock and Denial: "This can't really be happening to me."**

Losing your job feels like the ground being ripped out from under you. You feel numb, confused, and disbelieving.

**Panic and Shame: "Who am I now?" "How will I survive?"**

Reality sets in as the shock wears off and you are faced with feelings of anxiety and vulnerability, and threats to your sense of self, self-esteem, feelings of adequacy, and standing in the community.

**Sadness and/or Rage: "How could they do this to me!"**

You have been deeply wounded. It is common to swing from feelings of sadness to those of rage. Both are based on feeling vulnerable and helpless. You may turn your generalized rage out and lash out at your employer, the economy, or the world. Or you might turn it inward and dwell in depression and self-recrimination that can lead to self-destructive behavior.

**Focused Anger and Release: "How can I make the best of this?"**

Blending sadness and rage, you can reach a place where the energy of your anger can become purposeful, passionate, and creative. Your focused anger can help propel you out of grief and into a letting go of hurt and humiliation.

**Taking Stock and Moving Forward: "Who am I now, and where am I heading?"**

Your professional-- and maybe personal-- identity has been shaken. Now you have to discover who you are now. When an old reality crumbles, you are forced to re-discover yourself by taking a realistic self-inventory:

- What makes me an individual?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- What do I really want to do with my life?
- What is my next step?

**Acceptance and Recovery "I know what really matters and I'm ready to move forward."**

Grief is hell. It takes time and courage to through. And there is light at the end of the tunnel. Taking the time and giving yourself permission to grieve your loss of a job and an identity can move you into a whole new psychological equilibrium with a renewed sense of purpose, a stronger sense of what matters to you, and a faith in your ability to survive and mend.

People vary widely in their resilience. Some recover from job loss quickly and others take longer and get stuck along the way. As with any grief process, there' s a difficult-to-mark line between normal grieving and depression. Seek professional counsel if, after many months, you feel paralyzed and are plagued with symptoms such as: fatigue, sadness, listlessness, loss of appetite, escapist

behaviors (alcohol, drugs, etc.), difficulty concentrating, loss of interest in life, social withdrawal, or suicidal thoughts.