

7 Strategies For Coping With Stress When Your Job Is Ending

Losing a job is a very stressful experience. Like many other stressful experiences, it can be easier to cope with if you know what feelings you may experience along the way, and you have a plan and some strategies for coping.

Common Feelings When Your Job Ends

Losing a job—especially if it happens suddenly and it's not something you expect or want—is a significant loss and a major change. Common and normal feelings are often similar to those experienced by people who are grieving, and include:

- **Shock and/or denial:** You can feel a sense of disbelief that this is actually happening. It can take time to absorb the reality of the situation.
- **Anger:** You can blame those you think are responsible (including yourself) and feel resentful towards the organization.
- **Sadness:** When you lose a job you often lose a number of interconnected and important things such as your daily work, your work community, important routines; financial security, and an important part of your identity.
- **Fear:** You will likely feel anxious, unsettled, and worried about the implications of uncertain finances, change, and your prospects of getting another job.
- **Acceptance, relief, and/or excitement:** You may also feel that a burden has lifted, and/or excited at the thought that new opportunities await, even if you don't know what those will be yet.

It's quite normal to feel a mixture of all of these feelings, or to have these different feelings come in waves that surge and recede. For example, you might feel sadness, anger, *and* some relief. Or you may feel very anxious, then calmer, and then anxious again. Strong feelings will likely come and go during this time.

7 Strategies That Help

There are many things you can do to help yourself cope during this time of uncertainty and transition. Here are some things to try:

1. Accept your feelings

It is normal to feel a wide range of strong emotions during this season. Accept those feelings as they come instead of trying to push them away, and remember that these feelings will also go away again, in time.

However, accepting and acknowledging your feelings is not the same thing as welcoming them warmly and inviting them to settle in and stay for an extended period. It is normal to feel some anger if you lose

your job or if a program is eliminated because of funding challenges. However, it will not help you to spend a lot of time thinking about how the organization has made mistakes or failed you, fantasize about getting revenge, or focus for an extended period on feeling sorry for yourself.

So during days when you feel more anxious and depressed, try to remember that you *will* feel better again, in time. And when you catch yourself dwelling on thoughts that cause anger and anxiety, make an effort to remind yourself of some counter-balancing truths, as well. In other words, cultivate perspective.

2. Cultivate perspective

Don't discount your negative feelings of sadness, anger, and fear, or judge yourself for feeling bad. It is possible to acknowledge and create space for these feelings and, at the same time, remind yourself of helpful truths such as:

- ✓ This is a temporary setback or challenge.
- ✓ This too shall pass and things will get better.
- ✓ I've faced challenges before and gotten through those tough times. (Remind yourself of past successes and other times setbacks and unwanted changes have resulted in new and valuable opportunities.)
- ✓ I have options and resources. (Review your strengths and resources—savings, friends and family, professional connections, valuable experience, education, language skills etc.)
- ✓ I have people in my life who care about me.
- ✓ I have so much to be grateful for. (Look at everything that is good in your life and find things to be grateful for.)

3. Share with family members

If you are part of a family—and especially if your family depends primarily on your income—your unemployment will be stressful for them, too. Try to be open with them rather than dealing with it all alone. Discuss how you're feeling, and what you're doing and thinking about for next steps.

This approach is also good to take with children. Children tend to imagine the worst when things feel uncertain and scary, so being open with them about what is happening and reassuring them that you will all get through it together will help them. Listen to how your family members are feeling, and discuss ways you can support one another. It may also be helpful to discuss these events and how you're feeling with extended family.

4. Spend time talking with people who are positive

Spending time talking with people who are positive and encouraging can help you gain and maintain a sense of perspective and optimism. Seek out people who can help you identify good strategies, who encourage you, and who remind you that this is a temporary setback. Don't spend a lot of time right now talking with people who drain you or drag you down, who are constantly negative, or who make you feel worse.

Also, within the first several months after your job ends, you may still be able to access the any employee assistance benefits provided by your organization. It may help you to reach out to a counselor during this period to discuss coping strategies and seek other input and advice.

5. Be proactive about financial planning and any visa or residency issues

Financial strain associated with job loss is often a source of additional pressure and can cause significant problems, so be proactive about tackling this challenge. Don't ignore this issue or pretend it will magically sort itself out. This is something that's important to address directly, right away. Do things such as:

- ✓ Apply for unemployment benefits if they exist and you are eligible.
- ✓ Take stock of the money you have saved and your monthly expenses, so you know how long it will be before you feel significant financial strain.
- ✓ Adjust your budget straight away. Find ways to (at least temporarily) reduce expenses by cutting out unnecessary items.
- ✓ Reach out to your network and let them know you're interested in taking on contract work.
- ✓ Consider whether you can adjust your family routines to enable family members who are still employed to increase their hours and bring in more income.

On a related note, if you're living abroad and losing your job will impact your right to work or stay in the country, this is another issue that requires immediate attention. Act straight away to find out the implications for your visa status.

6. Be proactive about finding alternative opportunities

Give yourself at least a couple of days to come to terms with the situation (longer if possible). However, once you are ready to focus on finding a new job or creating alternative sources of income during this time of upheaval and uncertainty, dedicate significant time, effort, and energy to this issue.

If you can, make this a real priority and dedicate time to it every weekday. Set a regular schedule for these efforts, if possible. This will all help you feel more grounded in routine, in control, and as if you are accomplishing things.

You can:

- ✓ **Make a to-do list every day:** On this list, include some job searching tasks as well as some other activities you intend to do.
- ✓ **Update your resume:** Include identifying and making a list of things you're really good at (your core strengths and skills). Update this list of core strengths and skills as more ideas come to you over time.
- ✓ **Reach out to your network of contacts:** Connect with friends and acquaintances in your line of work. Many new opportunities open up through existing relationships, so invest in those existing relationships and look for ways to connect with others who are already working in your area of interest.

- ✓ **Accept every interview opportunity:** Even if you're not sure you want the job, the more you interview the better you will be at it. You also never know what opportunities may arise as a result.
- ✓ **Think creatively about how you could use your skills to earn additional income:** What skills and experience do you already have that you could use in new ways during this season? Could you work remotely as an editor, a coach, or a consultant? Can you provide temporary childcare? Can you assist neighbors and friends with practical tasks?
- ✓ **Consider volunteering:** If you are able, volunteering is one way to help others that is also research-proven to help *you* by boosting your mood and giving you a sense of purpose. It can also help you develop new skills and lead to other opportunities over time.

7. Use your extra time wisely

It may not feel like it, but the extra time you have in your schedule right now can actually bring some benefits and provide an opportunity for you to accomplish other tasks that are difficult to attend to when you're working full time.

Doing these things intentionally will also help you emotionally. Here are four ways you can put some of your extra time to very good use.

- ✓ **Take care of your health:** In times of increased stress, we are particularly vulnerable to getting sick, injuring ourselves, and developing harmful habits. It's particularly important to take care of your health during this period of stress and uncertainty. Continue or start doing that regular exercise you found difficult to fit into your schedule when you were working. Eat healthy food. Get enough sleep.
- ✓ **Do something you enjoy every day:** Even if it's only for 20 minutes, do something you enjoy every day. This might be a hobby like gardening, cooking, sports, art, or writing. It might be listening to music, reading, or watching a favorite TV program. Taking some time for enjoyment will help keep your spirits up and remind you that there are good things happening in your life.
- ✓ **Help someone else:** Do something to help family members and others with your extra time and energy. This will also help you by boosting your mood and giving you a sense of purpose.
- ✓ **Accomplish "life admin" tasks you often don't get to while you're working:** What jobs have you been meaning to "get to"? What needs repairing or organizing around the house? Who have you been meaning to contact? Making a list of these projects and working steadily to get them done can help boost your sense of purpose and accomplishment.

When things feel particularly difficult...

When you're unemployed, some days are *much* harder than others, and the hard days can come out of nowhere. You can be doing pretty well at making progress on your job search and ticking things off your to-do list, then BAM. You wake up feeling like you just don't want to get out of bed. Ever.

When these days happen, try to take the pressure off. This too shall pass. You will not feel this bad forever. And instead of tackling a huge to-do list on a particularly hard day, keep it simple. Aim to do three things only:

- ✓ Something useful (such as help a friend with something small)
- ✓ Something kind (for someone else, or for yourself)
- ✓ Something you've been putting off

Keep these three things small and achievable. This is not the day to try to paint the whole house because it's something you've been putting off, but it *might* be the day to organize a cupboard in the kitchen. Make sure you pick something you can achieve in less than half a day.

These small achievements may not banish the heavy feelings, but they can stop you from feeling bad about feeling bad. They can gently challenge the voices in your head telling you that you're useless and wasting your time. They can help give you a small, solid, sense of accomplishment even in the midst of feeling awful. And this feeling can help you hang in there until things feel lighter and you can re-engage with your job search and other responsibilities again.