

Six ways to survive losing your job by finding yourself

Knowing why job loss makes us feel so awful is key to understanding how to deal with it. The emotional turmoil we experience when losing a job creates the same grief as losing a loved one. One study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* showed that job loss can have the same psychological and health consequences as those arising during the grieving process. These would include denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, hope, depression and acceptance, as laid out in the psychological 'Five stages of grief' model.



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Having a job is an essential part of a person's development, and finding yourself unemployed triggers a process of personal and social adjustment. According to a Swedish study, people see work as the basis for belonging. Losing a job affects their social lives and, because of financial changes, their spending habits. They also found that feelings of isolation, loss of self-esteem and hopelessness, which affected their physical well-being, were significant in those who had become unemployed. Older people experience this progress more intensely, as do those with dependents relying on their income. Researchers concluded that this was related to their concept of how employable they were and the pressure they were under to provide.

Six ways to survive and thrive

Job loss is a challenge, but it's not an insurmountable one. In fact, according to an article in Human Resource Management Review:

“ The struggle with the trauma of job loss can generate new self-meanings and foster stronger, more authentic and independent selves. ”

But how do you do it?

- **Deal with the grief**

The University of Washington's Counseling Centre emphasises the importance of grieving: “It allows us to ‘free-up’ energy that is bound to the lost experience – so that we might re-invest that energy elsewhere.” Even if your job

search needs to begin immediately, allow yourself to experience the different emotions so that you can move on. Journaling or talking to a friend can help.

- **Take care**

Author and grief counsellor, Dr Alan D. Wolfelt, emphasises that anyone going through loss should, “Respect what your body and mind tell you. Nurture yourself. Get enough rest. Eat balanced meals. You must mourn if you are to heal, but you must also live.”

Schedule time for self-care. Exercise at home or walk around the block, make healthier food choices, get enough sleep and stick to regular hours. You'll be better able to put your all into the job hunt if you are feeling refreshed and energised. Remember that part of self-care involves protection against disaster. Keep your insurance and medical aid up to date so that, if the worst happens, you won't find yourself in even deeper waters.

- **Be yourself**

Stephen Covey, the author of *The Seven Habits Of Highly Successful People*, suggests writing a mission statement: “This becomes your ‘constitution’, the solid expression of your vision and values... the criterion by which you measure everything else in your life.”

The more clarity you have on who you are, the less you will feel like losing your job means you've lost yourself. It allows you to define what kind of job you really want. If finances allow, take a learning course – either to brush up on existing skills or to learn something completely new. Education can never be taken away from you, and it indicates motivation and work ethic to potential employers.

- **Schedule your life**

The loss of routine is a major stress factor after retrenchment, so it's important to set up a new routine and stick to it in order to make every day a job-finding day. Wake up on time, get dressed, have a schedule for job searching and studies, take a lunch break, set aside time for connecting with people... in a nutshell, make finding a job your job.

- **Stay connected**

In the aforementioned Swedish study, respondents reported that their coping strategy against poor mental health included social support and having other activities to provide structure and meaning. This can be challenging when financial worries keep you from going out or connecting as you used to, but persevere – you may be surprised by the support you receive.

And don't be afraid to say you're currently looking for a job – almost everyone has been in the same boat and this lets them know that you're available. Who knows, they might just help you find exactly what you're looking for.

- **Donate your time**

Volunteering boosts mood, provides a sense of purpose, and decreases isolation. You may also learn new skills and meet new people, which could provide networking opportunities. Moreover, volunteer work – especially if related to your industry – is a bonus on your CV. One study of 70,000 people by the US Corporation for National and Community Service found that, “Acquiring skills or knowledge as a volunteer and then putting them to use may demonstrate higher levels of capacity, potentially making the volunteer more attractive to... employers.” The decade-long study additionally noted that volunteers had a 27% greater chance of finding employment.

As the saying goes, "Life is what happens when you're making other plans." If you use job loss as an opportunity to grow and learn, then it may turn out to be exactly what you need to move onwards and upwards.

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