

The Unemployment Syndrome: Working Your Way Through Joblessness

Unemployment Is Not a Disease!

EXPERIENCE:

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Taking myself seriously as a health writer first occurred more by default than by design. I began writing for publication during a period of prolonged unemployment exacerbated by the effects of Reaganomics on the public interest world in which I had been working. That writing should have saved me psychologically (although not economically!) during this trying time seems highly ironic since writers are so often subjected to the trauma of unemployment and its subsequent sense of rejection and isolation. My own experience with prolonged joblessness led me to insights about the sequellae of long-term job loss that I believe are useful to share with other writers.

A Communicable Disease

Unemployment, particularly when it occurs for extended periods of time, begins to follow three health-related processes. First, it is treated like a communicable disease. Friends and colleagues begin to behave as though being out of work were a contagious phenomenon, often withdrawing or maintaining a palpable distance. Professional counselors often legitimize this attitude. I was staggered once at a career counseling session when the "expert" speaker told an audience of highly qualified and experienced jobseekers, "And for God's sake, don't hang out with unemployed people, whatever you do. It's really not good for you." This epidemic mentality flew in the face of my own experience. For me, talking with

others who were not working constituted essential social support. The validation and empathy from peers who could share the frustration and fear associated with job loss was critical in maintaining mental equilibrium. Those who were gainfully employed, on the other hand, seemed to have a knack for inappropriate and painful comments. "I'd give anything to have some time off so I could do all the things I've always wanted to do," they would gloat. "Of course, if only you weren't so selective you'd be working by now," others said. In short, the generic messages from the Haves to the Have-Nots seemed to be: "Lower your sights," "Try harder," "Consider relocating" and "Enjoy your freedom." After a time, I really did begin to feel contaminated by a plague that was out of control.

Unemployment is not an infectious disease, but it is an extremely traumatic event. It includes feelings of loss, shock and lowered self-esteem, and often it leads to serious psychosocial and economic problems that can affect relationships. The psychological deprivation associated with unemployment puts job loss high on the scale of stressful life events defined by Holmes and Rahe in 1967. Their Scale of Life Change Units allows for the increased probability of illness or disease if events involving a change in living patterns accumulate to crisis proportions. Unemployment is recognized as not a single event but rather a situational crisis impacting a number of other outcomes.

Post Traumatic Distress Syndrome

In this sense, prolonged absence from the workforce also can be demonstrated to follow Post Traumatic Distress Syndrome (PTSD). PTSD is a relatively newly defined disorder, previously labeled "shell shock" or "combat fatigue" within a military context. Specialists in disaster relief also have noted the phenomenon but usually have viewed it as related to a single disaster. Although few empirical data exist, PTSD as an anxiety disorder is supported by face validity. As a psychiatric diagnosis, there are four criteria for identifying the syndrome: 1) presence of a recognized stressor of extreme magnitude; 2) re-experiencing of the trauma; 3) numbing of responsiveness, and 4) at least two recognized symptoms of anxiety and/or depression. These symptoms might include exaggerated startle response, sleep disturbances, survivor guilt, memory impairment, trouble concentrating or avoidance behaviors. Increasingly, PTSD is being viewed less as a clinical category related to "gross stress reactions" and more as a syndrome relevant to general "adjustment reactions to adult life."

Certainly, work-related crises can elicit symptomatology associated with anxiety and depression. Increased irritability, impulsivity, avoidance and "psychic numbing" are familiar to any of us who have spent long periods "between assignments." Job hunting often feels like a desperate act of survival from the trenches in a world of open warfare. When we finally do make it back into the realm of paid employment, we may well suffer "survivor guilt" as we watch our equally talented friends continue the search for creative and meaningful work.

Death and Dying

Finally, prolonged unemployment

can lead us to experience the process of death and dying, with respect to our professional persona, as defined by the work of psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. The six stages of emotion identified by Kubler-Ross that people go through when they learn they have a terminal illness are germane to people experiencing job loss.

At first we may deny the experience, or the feelings it elicits in us. Then we often move to anger, which can be debilitating, or which in some instances spurs us on to new action and initiative. After denial and anger, we may move to bargaining, often the desperate plea that allows us to take the step of lowering our sights which so many have encouraged. Our internal dialogue might run something like this: "If I take this assignment/job, it will probably lead to something else." Or, "If I get to do this, I'll never complain again!" When that doesn't work, many of us get stuck in the fourth stage, depression. It is here that rejection and isolation can significantly impair our self-esteem. We may begin to feel serious loss of identity and doubts about our abilities. Physical symptoms may begin to manifest. During this stage in my own experience, I suffered extraordinary bouts of hyperventilation when trying to address groups, even though I had a great deal of experience as a public speaker and lecturer. I suspect this occurred because deep down, I no longer felt legitimate as an expert in my field.

In addition, much of the depression phase is also grief and mourning, which we need to work through when we have suffered a loss. Finally, we can move beyond depression to the fifth stage, acceptance, which can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, we may feel that we have accepted the demise of our professional persona. As one colleague told me during her lengthy episode of unemployment, "I began to accept the fact that I would pro-

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bably never work again in my profession." In a more positive sense, acceptance can mean that we acknowledge our situation and move on to hope for a better and more creative future.

Acceptance usually frees us up to plunge into new efforts to find work. A variety of resources exist ranging from career counseling for those who seek new directions to a plethora of how-to books for the job-seeker. The popularity of Richard Bolles' *What Color Is Your Parachute?* attests to the market for guides to innovative job search techniques. Most of these give advice similar to that provided by psychologist Jacqueline Horner Flumez in her book, *Divorcing A Corporation*. "Ditch any victim mentality or false pride that blocks you from using your contacts. Remember that over 60 percent of all jobs come from networking." Flumez also says, like others, that looking for work is work and requires similar time management skills. "Make a list of goals," she suggests, "and don't devote big effort to tasks of little value. Remember: 80 percent of your money comes from 20 percent of your assignments."

Suggestions like these are helpful to be sure. But the single piece of advice I would offer, again from my own experience, is this: Don't internalize a systems problem as though you were individually at fault. Many people begin, as I did, to believe that failure to find appropriate work reflects genuine gaps in their own experience or skills. In a city like Washington, DC, where supply and demand in terms of the

workforce are way out of kilter, it is all too easy to assign or accept individual blame.

But H.G. Kaufman in *Professionals In Search of Work* gives a different and valid perspective. "Unemployment at current levels is reaching epidemic proportions. Economists use such esoteric terms as 'fractional' and 'short-term' and 'recession-related' to depersonalize the meaning and to divorce economic action from social and political action. But the dilemma has reached global proportions." Kaufman is concerned with the psychological effects of unemployment and underemployment and provides a critical analysis that deals with the myth that only nonprofessionals face the problem. He believes that political activism is necessary, and he thinks it may come from unemployed professionals. "The nation cannot afford to waste its own talent and human genius. The professionals themselves, as thinking, intelligent people, feel deep resentments to both unemployment and underemployment. The thwarted desire for job involvement could find its outlet in political action to change the system itself."

Understanding this larger context is important so that, when we are not working, we can be good to ourselves. We need to know that we are not contagious, we are not dying, and that the "symptoms" we experience are grounded in a truly traumatic adult life event. Attacking the problem from a positive and guilt-free perspective can lead us to interesting new avenues of opportunity. Out of my jobless writings grew a Cable TV series, a potential film and a wider publication market. Because there was still not enough to fill the time, I completed a graduate degree, and that led to a position in international health communications. Recently I reduced my hours in order to devote more time to writing. But this time, it was by design, accompanied by the pleasure of having gone full circle. □

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