

Layoff Survivors: How to Do More Than Survive

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A job provides a sense of belonging, security and identity. In fact, many people define themselves by what they do for a living. Attachment to a job is accompanied by feelings of control, known expectations, and loyalty. A threat to job security threatens much more than loss of income.

One doesn't have to personally experience losing his or her job to understand the traumatic effects of layoff on those who have been let go. A layoff affects every employee in some way. Those who remain may also experience loss. Maybe they feel the loss of co-workers whom they have grown close to or the loss of the perception of a secure, predictable, and benevolent work environment. They may feel guilty about seeing people they really care about lose their job while they keep theirs. They may worry and wonder what happened to those who left.

Layoff survivors may also struggle with:

- Wondering when and if there will be another round of layoffs, even after learning that their job is "safe" - employees who leave (willingly or unwillingly) are at least free to start fresh and move on with their lives - layoff survivors must continue to deal with uncertainty.
- Thinking that their future options for advancement and pay increases could be limited and are uncertain.
- Suddenly becoming uncomfortably aware of the skill areas in which they need to further develop and their importance to the company.
- Worrying about making mistakes that could jeopardize their current employment.
- Fearing to take days off.
- Taking on extra duties: working harder and faster.
- Changes in their concentration, mood, motivation, morale, commitment, and productivity.

In short, we grieve the loss of the way things were, and typically feel stress about an uncertain future. This article describes why and how we experience these feelings and how to minimize their disruption of our life.

The Mind-Body Response to a Traumatic Event

Before the event -

Our body responds to images created in our mind. That is why we feel agitated when we interpret an event (regardless of whether these images arise out of a real or imaginary threat) as a big problem. Over the short term, this stress or agitation may mobilize us to take action. But if our anxiety level remains high or increases over a prolonged period of time and nothing is done to manage it, we begin to "burn out" from functioning non-stop on "red-alert."

After the event -

Feelings of shock, disbelief, denial, guilt, worry, anxiety, or depression may arise out of the trauma of losing something important and being unable to prevent the loss. You may already be familiar with the stages of loss:

- Initially, we feel stunned, confused, unable to accept the situation, and/or deny that the event has actually happened.
- Next, anger arises because we were powerless to prevent the loss of something really important: anger is an outgrowth of our frustration.
- At some point, we may feel guilty and responsible for the loss; that somehow, we could have prevented it. We play endless "If only..." scenarios in our mind. Feelings of resentment are also common and can lead to depression, especially when we stop resisting reality, and the implications of the loss "hit home."
- Eventually, we accept the situation - if we have given ourselves time and permission to feel and deal with negative emotions. We have only enough energy for facing forward toward the future or backward toward the past, not both. In this stage, an understanding of the price we pay for hanging on indefinitely to angry, depressed feelings can help move us into a period of revitalization.

Thoughts from Survivors

Helping others -

The following observations by employees whose jobs survived a layoff may give you some ideas to build on:

- I thought about how I would talk to other employees (before they actually approached me) who were upset about the layoff. How I said something turned out to be more important than what I said.
- Really listen. It is healing to be listened to. People in crisis need to talk about how they feel. Too often, instead of listening, I realize that I'm actually processing my own thoughts. When it's my turn to talk, I react by telling the person how I feel, or about a similar experience. This is not very helpful.
- Don't assume that an older worker, or one whose family has other means of support, accepts, or is comfortable with a layoff.

Helping yourself -

- I can't control what happens to me, but I can control my response. Instead of becoming preoccupied with rumors and worrying about the security of my position, I made an effort to keep moving forward. I concentrated on building my education and skill level. I learned as much as possible about the requirements of the new parts of my job, and how to improve what I'd been doing all along.
- I wasn't used to cutting myself any slack, but this time, I gave myself time to adjust to and accept the changes in my organization.
- I didn't make any major decisions during the most stressful times.
- When I'm stressed, I tend to think negatively about my ability and experience. So, I tried to focus on my strengths and competencies rather than on my shortcomings.
- I found a few good listeners, and avoided people who are negative and critical in their outlook.
- My work will never really be finished. So instead of grinding away all day long, I take short relaxation breaks. I finish a few pages of a novel, or read the newspaper for five minutes. Others do stretching or breathing exercises, or walk twice around the halls.

- Outside the office, I do something to balance my work and free time. When I give myself a real break on weekends, I'm more productive during the week. I only pick activities that I look forward to, I never force myself to "have fun."
- In times of intense change, we're all constantly changing directions. This made me anxious, so I unconsciously created more work for myself by keeping an eye on things I wouldn't have watched before. I was always trying to anticipate the next change - waiting for the other shoe to drop. I was becoming a wreck. My friend's favorite saying is "live in the present moment." I'm trying to follow her advice.
- At some point, it occurred to me that I might actually be better off than before the layoffs. Yes, I have more work, but I also have more variety and autonomy.

Suggestions from the Experts

Keep things in perspective -

- Ask yourself:
 - I've been through change before; what have I learned that can help me now?
 - Who in my life can I turn to for support?
- Some people find that repeating certain positive phrases to themselves helps them to accept change more easily. For example:
 - This is only temporary; it will pass.
 - Change is an opportunity for growth.

Maintain your physical fitness -

- Get exercise:
 - A physically fit body is better able to withstand the effects of stress.
 - Exercise has a calming effect that lasts long after you stop exercising.
 - Exercise can stimulate the release of chemicals in the brain called endorphins, which reduce depression and stress.
- Eat right:
 - What you eat directly affects the way you feel.
 - Limit your intake of caffeine.
 - Eat smaller portions: you'll be able to digest your food more easily.
 - Resist the temptation to turn to alcohol and drugs.

Practice relaxation techniques -

- Body scan:
 - Scan your body, looking for tension.
 - At each tense place, take a deep, full breath and imagine the tension being swept away as you exhale.
 - Repeat a relaxing phrase to yourself (e.g.: I feel peaceful and still).

Get the support of others -

- Let those close to you know that you're adjusting to a difficult change.
- Seek professional help if the effects of stress interfere with your ability to function normally.

No matter how you deal with changes in your workplace, "...you remain a rare and unique individual, no matter how the world of work treats you. Your worth is not defined simply by your work, but by your spirit, your heart, and your compassion toward others" (Richard Bolles, 1994).